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Author's Note

GUYS!

WELCOME TO THE SECOND ARC OF THE KITTYPET CLANBORN SERIES! Oh my goodness, I cannot BELIEVE that this is happening. I am thrilled and chilled to the bone, and I cannot WAIT for you all to go on this journey with me.

I've said this before, but I originally didn't plan on writing a second arc, but after some thought, I decided that there were so many more stories that I could tell; I was nowhere NEAR done writing about our lovely Lilypetal, Goldenshine, Swiftflight, and all of our other loveable beans. Get ready for a crazy, wonderful ride! Hope it won't be too bumpy! ;)

But seriously, I SO hope that you all enjoy this first book of the second arc of Kittypet Clanborn! It means so much to me that you all are still here, and your support means so much to me. <3

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER Bramblestar—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes
DEPUTY Lilypetal—brown tabby-and-white she-cat with hazel

Apprentice, Lilypaw

MEDICINE CATS Jayfeather—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

Leafpool—light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

WARRIORS (toms, and she-cats without kits)

Graystripe—long-haired gray tom

Dustpelt—dark brown tabby tom

Sandstorm—pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

Brackenfur—golden brown tabby tom

Sorreltail—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Cloudtail—long-haired white tom with blue eyes

Brightheart—white she-cat with ginger patches

Millie—striped gray tabby she-cat

Thornclaw—golden brown tabby tom

Squirrelflight—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes

Goldenshine—golden brown tabby she-cat with gray eyes

Swiftflight—dark gray tom (with a white chest and paws) with gray-blue eyes

Cherryfall—ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Molewhisker—brown-and-cream tom

Snowstorm—white she-cat with gray ears and paws and blue eyes

Dustystorm—gray tom with light gray flecks and pale blue eyes

Nightwing—sleek black she-cat with green eyes

Wrenfeather—brown tabby tom with pale blue eyes

Lightningstrike—black tom with a white chest and paws and yellow eyes

Emberheart—golden brown and white tabby she-cat with hazel eyes

Spiderleg—long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes

Apprentice, Amberpaw

Birchfall—light brown tabby tom

Whitewing—white she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Dewpaw

Berrynose—cream-colored tom

Poppyfrost—tortoiseshell she-cat

Mousewhisker—gray-and-white tom

Cinderheart—gray tabby she-cat

Lionblaze—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Rosepetal—dark cream she-cat

Briarlight—dark brown she-cat

Blossomfall—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Bumblestripe—very pale gray tom with black stripes

Apprentice, Seedpaw

Dovewing—pale gray she-cat with green eyes

Ivypool—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Apprentice, Snowpaw

APPRENTICES (more than six moons old, training to become warriors)

Amberpaw—pale ginger she-cat

Dewpaw—gray-and-white tom

Snowpaw—white, fluffy tom

Lilypaw—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Seedpaw—golden-brown she-cat

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Daisy—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Purdy—plump tabby former loner with a gray muzzle

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER Blackstar—large white tom with huge jet-black paws
DEPUTY Rowanclaw—ginger tom
MEDICINE CAT(S) Littlecloud—very small tabby tom

WARRIORS

Crowfrost—black-and-white tom

Snowbird—pure-white she-cat

Tawnypelt—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Grasspaw

Owlclaw—light brown tabby tom

Scorchfur—dark gray tom

Tigerheart—dark brown tabby tom

Ferretclaw—black-and-gray tom

Apprentice, Spikepaw

Stoatfur—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Pouncetail—brown tabby tom

QUEENS

Snowbird—pure-white she-cat

Dawnpelt—cream-furred she-cat

ELDERS

Oakfur—small brown tom

Smokefoot—black tom

Snaketail—dark brown tom with a tabby-striped tail

Whitewater—white she cat with long fur, blind in one eye

Ratscar—brown tom with long scar across his back

Kinkfur—tabby she-cat, with long fur that sticks out at all angles

Ivytail—black, white, and tortoiseshell she-cat

WINDCLAN

LEADER Onestar—brown tabby tom
DEPUTY Harespring—brown-and-white tom

Apprentice, Slightpaw

MEDICINE CAT Kestrelflight—mottled gray tom

WARRIORS

Crowfeather—dark gray tom

Apprentice, Featherpaw

Nightcloud—black she-cat

Apprentice, Hootpaw

Gorsetail—very pale gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

Weaselfur—ginger tom with white paws

Leaftail—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Oatpaw

Emberfoot—gray tom with two dark paws

Heathertail—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Breezepelt—black tom with amber eyes

Furzepelt—gray-and-white she-cat

Crouchfoot—ginger tom

Larkwing—pale brown tabby she-cat

APPRENTICES

Slightpaw—black tom with a flash of white on his chest

Featherpaw—gray tabby she-cat

Hootpaw—dark gray tom

Oatpaw—pale brown tabby tom

QUEENS

Sedgewhisker—light brown tabby she-cat

ELDERS

Whiskernose—light brown tom

Whitetail—small white she-cat

RIVERCLAN

LEADER Mistystar—gray she-cat with blue eyes
DEPUTY Reedwhisker—black tom
Apprentice, Lizardpaw
MEDICINE CAT(S) Mothwing—dappled golden she-cat
Willowshine—gray tabby she-cat

WARRIORS

Mintfur—light gray tabby tom

Minnowtail—dark gray she-cat

Mallownose—light brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Havenpaw

Mosspelt—tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice, Perchpaw

Shimmerpelt—silver she-cat

Lakeheart—gray tabby she-cat

Heronwing—dark gray-and-black tom

Duskfur—brown tabby she-cat

Grasspelt—light brown tom

QUEENS

Icewing—white she-cat with blue eyes

Petalfur—gray-and-white she-cat

Mosspelt—tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

ELDERS

Pebblefoot—mottled gray tom

Pouncetail—ginger-and-white tom

Rushtail—light brown tabby tom

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLANS

Smoky—muscular gray-and-white tom who lives in a barn at the horseplace

Oreo—black and white tom with hazel eyes

Chloe—pale ginger and white she-cat with blue eyes

Minty—black-and-white she-cat

Jessy—dark brown she-cat

Frankie—gray tabby tom

OTHER ANIMALS

Midnight—a star-gazing badger who lives by the sea

Prologue

[image]

The forest was quiet, the only noises being the light ripple of a perfectly clear stream, and the slightest shiver of leaves from the most calm breeze. The sky above was a dark blue, filled with countless glittering stars that lit up the never-ending night.

These stars shone down on the entire forest, giving everything a sort-of whimsical glow that would make any cat stare in awe. It also made the large pond of water set in the middle of a grassy clearing glow like a thousand moonstones.

It was blinding in the most beautiful way, however, the misty gray she-cat staring down into it wasn't phased at all, her pale blue eyes calm but intent as she stared down into the sparkling pool. Her long fur was tingling with excitement and anticipation, and her whiskers were twitching with curiosity.

She wasn't sure how long she had been sitting like that until she slightly lifted her head and twitched at the stirring she heard behind her. She then looked over her shoulder to see the flame-colored pelt of a tom she knew very well. "Not afraid of the water anymore, Mistpelt?" the tom purred, a teasing gleam in his green eyes.

Mistpelt narrowed her pale blue eyes, letting out a sniff. "Very funny, Firestar," she muttered. "I'd watch it – one of these trees might be struck by lightning, catch on fire, and then fall on you."

Firestar then rolled his eyes and purred with amusement. Mistpelt then only looked at her friend, old Clanmate, and leader that had come to StarClan after the Dark Forest battle for another moment before shifting her gaze back to the pool. "And no, I'm not afraid of this kind of water."

Mistpelt then narrowed her eyes, proceeding to lower her head even more to get an even deeper look into to the water. To any other cat

– like Firestar, possibly – likely just saw a shallow pond from where they stood. However, from Mistpelt's view, this water was deeper and more mysterious than the largest oceans.

Just beneath her, Mistpelt had a bird's-eye view of the stone hollow she knew to be ThunderClan's camp – the place she had called home for so long, and the place she had gotten to enjoy for the second half of her life. *The place where I found my daughter again after so many moons*, Mistpelt then thought, the day she discovered her long-lost Wrenkit again after losing her at three moons old. *And the place where I got to she her grow up in Clan life, have a family of her own, and become a cat that anyone would respect.*

And Mistpelt found her heart swelling with an overwhelming love as she actually caught sight of her daughter below, where she was curled up in what Mistpelt recognized as the warriors den. Her long-time mate, Thornclaw, was pressed up right against her, his tail wrapped around her flank protectively.

"Ahhh," Mistpelt heard Firestar meow understandingly as she padded up to sit next to the fluffy she-cat. "Checking on our Lilypetal again?"

"Of course," Mistpelt meowed. "I may not be able to be with her physically, but I have promised her that I will be with her in spirit, in whatever way I can. And anyway,"

Mistpelt then let out a sigh. "Even though we were able to spend so many moons together once we both found our way to ThunderClan, I..." She then trailed off, closing her eyes for a moment. "After all we've been through – when we were both taken away... when we weren't speaking to each other soon before I..."

The gray fluffy she-cat then opened her eyes again. "I still feel as if I somehow to make up for lost time. Watch over her whenever I get the chance."

Mistpelt could see Firestar giving her an understanding, sympathetic nod. "I see," the flame-colored tom as he flashed her a supportive glance. "I am certain that she appreciates it, and feels it. Mistpelt, I can't even begin to tell you how she was grieving after

you came here."

Mistpelt then let out a snort and began to shake her head. "Oh, I'm sure," she replied with exasperation as she thought about all that her daughter had gone through since Mistpelt had gone to StarClan.

Mistpelt had only seen a glimpse of it when she was alive, but to see the constant stress, fear, and anger that Lilypetal had gone through all because of a single sick, vengeful, and heartless Dark Forest tom, had torn Mistpelt to shreds. Sending Lilypetal guiding dreams during that time was the least that Mistpelt had felt she could do.

And hearing from Lilypetal after the Dark Forest battle just how much the dreams Mistpelt had sent had eased her and empowered her, Mistpelt had vowed that she would continue to do the same thing whenever her daughter was in dismay or trouble – leading Mistpelt to check on Lilypetal every single day.

She then heard Firestar let out what sounded like a mix of a sigh and a growl. "I still can't believe what that tom put her through," the former leader muttered, echoing Mistpelt's thoughts. "I would have tossed him into a bonfire for messing with *my* daughter all of those moons ago, but... what he did to Lilypetal... that constant shadow he casted over her... I cannot believe how resilient and brave she made herself appear through all of it."

"You don't need to convince me," Mistpelt muttered, a growl already beginning to rise in her own throat. "Ashfur is a name that can probably never be spoken to her without her eyes flashing with apprehension or anger." *After all, he is the reason that Snowflight is here... why Thornclaw was almost here... why I'm here...*

Mistpelt then let out a sigh, giving a quick shake of her head. "She is the strongest cat that I know, and I'm sure many of the cats around her now could say the same," she then meowed more evenly. She then closed her eyes once again as she was filled with pride. "She is more than deserving of the position as ThunderClan's deputy."

"I definitely concur," Firestar replied, his green eyes gleaming as he

looked down at Lilypetal with pride. "I could not have felt more at ease with leaving ThunderClan in her paws, and in Bramblestar's."

The former ThunderClan leader then closed his eyes and began to shake his head. "After all she's been through, I think she deserves anything good that's coming to her," Firestar muttered. "With Ashfur gone, the Dark Forest defeated, and all of the Clans at peace, I can only hope that things are turning up for her now..."

Firestar then trailed off as she noticed Mistpelt's intense gaze now staring deeply and worriedly into the glittering pool. "What's the matter?"

Mistpelt's gaze was now locked on Lilypetal's brown tabby and white fur, her tail beginning to twitch anxiously. "Well, hopefully nothing, but..."

Mistpelt then trailed off this time, continuing to watch Lilypetal as she slept next to Thornclaw. While the golden brown tabby tom seemed to be sleeping soundly, Mistpelt quickly noticed that her daughter seemed to be stirring in her place, her eyes practically screwed shut as she seemed to readjust herself every few heartbeats.

Firestar seemed to notice the same thing. "Strange..." the flame-colored tom muttered. "Lilypetal's always been a restless one, and I know she's had her fair share of bad dreams, but... she looks like she's having quite an uncomfortable sleep."

Mistpelt narrowed her eyes even more. "I wonder if she's even asleep at all..." the she-cat speculated, even though in her mind she was already certain – her daughter's quicker breathing, her seemingly sealed-shut eyes, and the way she constantly stirred showed that she was nowhere near sleep at all. *I've seen it over the course of several nights now...*

"I can imagine she hasn't been sleeping very well lately," Mistpelt then murmured aloud, flashing Firestar a glance. "Yes, Firestar, Lilypetal more than deserves peace, but..." the fluffy she-cat emphasized. "With all she has been through, how strong she was through it all, I worried it would catch up to her someday."

Firestar said nothing, his green eyes now dark with worry as he stared down at the pool with Mistpelt. The fluffy she-cat couldn't help but feel a wave of gratitude at seeing the flame-colored tom so worried – he appeared as worried as a father would, and as worried as he would be if he were staring down at Squirrelflight or Leafpool. *I practically feel indebted to him by how much of a father figure he was to my daughter*, Mistpelt then thought, *and in a strange way, it feels nice that we can share in this worry together.*

Mistpelt then began to shake her head slowly. "What's she's been through... it's all something she will forever have to cope with, and will bring her a fair share of burdens."

Mistpelt then took a deep breath, feeling a wave of certainty run through her bones as the calming StarClan winds brushed her long fur, almost as if to send her a message. "But at the same time, I know it's making her stronger. It appears I still might have to remind her of that," she then meowed, watching as her daughter's beautiful hazel eyes suddenly opened, her brown tabby and white fur stretching out as she began to rise from her nest. "Because Firestar, Ashfur's reign wasn't the end to a story. There's more for her to experience... go through... to learn about herself..."

Mistpelt then let out a sigh. "And for *me* to tell her..."

"Oh?" Firestar then meowed as him and Mistpelt exchanged a knowing glance. "You're going to share... *that* with her soon?"

"I think so," Mistpelt breathed, now staring warily back at the former ThunderClan leader. She then looked back down at her daughter in the pool. "I'm just waiting for the right time."

"Are you now?" Firestar then murmured as he glanced up at the trees. "If things go in the future as we think they are, Mistpelt, that might be soon."

"I'll be ready," Mistpelt reassured the flame-colored tom. "She deserves to know, especially now that I am certain about it."

Mistpelt then let out a huff. "But that is just one, among many things that she will take on, learn, and go through in the future,"

she then meowed as she watched Lilypetal let out what seemed like an exasperated sigh before padding out of the warriors den and into the dawn light. "As much as she has gone through already, this is just the beginning for her. There is still a fire in her that has yet to be lit."

Chapter 1

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I was in a crouched position, my unsheathed claws just barely sinking into the soft earth to keep myself still and steady. The slightly cool breeze just barely brushed my calm, cool and collected fur as it lied flat on my back.

My hazel eyes were narrowed and staring straight ahead, my target just barely visible through the brambles I was hiding behind. *That's right. Stay oblivious and confused...*

I then crouched down just a bit more, lashing my tail back and forth just slightly - half to make sure the breeze was still blowing *my* way, but also just out of excitement, before finally leaping forward to reveal myself. But instead of diving straight for my target, I let myself fly above it and then skid back onto the ground gracefully.

"Surprise!" I exclaimed enthusiastically, my voice not being able to suppress laughter as my gaze met large, bewildered blue eyes. "Better luck next time, Lilypaw!"

I then fully forced myself to hold back mrrows of laughter as my apprentice seemed to let out a frustrated huff. "Foxdung! I didn't see you coming at all!" the gray and white she-cat sighed as I touched my tail to her shoulder. "How did you do that?"

I gave a simple shrug before leading Lilypaw to the brambles I had just been behind. "I approached it pretty much how I would approach hunting prey – keeping low, keeping hidden, and keeping quiet until I'm ready to strike," I explained as I flashed the she-cat an encouraging look. "And, of course, I have to make sure my target is distracted." I then gave a small wink.

Lilypaw then managed to let out a purr. "And how does any cat

expect me to be better than prey at making sure that I'm not attacked or ambushed? I didn't even see you!"

I also let out a purr as I affectionately flicked my apprentice's ear. "Well, because you are much, much smarter than a shrew or a thrush, Lilypaw," I muttered. "Once you know how to go about catching someone who may be sneaking up on you, I promise that you'll be able to sense them from several fox-lengths away!"

With a nod of my head, I then gestured for Lilypaw to return to her original spot in the clearing ahead of my clump of bramble bushes. "First off, it's not just about seeing at all. If you just rely on your sight, you're done for."

"Uh, oh," Lilypaw breathed, her eyes widening again.

"But this is why we train!" I purred before then crouching back down into the brambles. "You can't just look and hope to find your attacker – you have to smell... listen..."

I then narrowed my eyes again, my fur slightly tingling with mischief as I began to sneak around and leave my spot, still making sure I was out of sight. "Smell or hear anything?"

I gave the slightest nod of approval, even though my apprentice couldn't see it, when I saw Lilypaw give a flick of her ears and raise her muzzle in the air, her pink nose twitching. "...movement," she seemed to murmur half to herself.

I then fell completely quiet, hoping to StarClan that I could let my apprentice make her own way from here. "Your scent is slightly drifting from where it originally was..." she continued.

Good. Good...

"These brambles are thick, and I can't be sure, but..."

I then let out a startled, yet excited yelp when suddenly I saw a flash of grey and white above me, and I stood up in my spot and turned around to see Lilypaw making her own graceful landing, her blue eyes gleaming with satisfaction and elation. "Surprise!" she then cried out, her tail lashing back and forth excitedly. "How was

that?"

I stared back at my apprentice in amazement. "As perfect as perfect can be, Lilypaw!" I purred to her. "Wonderful, wonderful job. I promise that with even more practice, being cautious like that will become instinctual."

The smaller she-cat gave me the sweetest, most enthusiastic nod. "Thank you, thank you, Lilypetal!" Lilypaw meowed to me, as she did after pretty much anything that I'd ever taught her. "I can't wait to practice that more."

"And you will! Tomorrow," I meowed to my apprentice with a snort, glancing up at the sky, just barely being able to see the glowing sun crossing the sky through the blooming oak trees. "The sun will be down fairly soon – you deserve to grab something to eat before you go to sleep, and I've got to make sure there's nothing Bramblestar needs me to take care of before *I* go to sleep."

"Okay!" Lilypaw mewed, licking her lips just once. I then was surprised to see her flash me a concerned look. "But are you sure you shouldn't go to sleep as soon as we return to camp?"

My eyes widened back at my apprentice in shock. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you just look a little tired, that's all!" the she-cat answered me, her demeanor now becoming a little more shy as she seemed to force out her words. "You have been for a bit now."

And whether or not I actually am is a secret I'm taking to my burial spot.

After adjusting myself and shifting a bit uncomfortably, I cleared my throat and gave my concerned apprentice a sharp shake of my head. "Oh, that's just getting older, Lilypaw." *Oh, StarClan forbid. That's almost worse than Lilypaw thinking I'm tired.*

But nevertheless, I went on. "Plus, if I was tired at all, you woke me up when you ambushed me earlier! Hey..." I then narrowed my eyes once again, glancing at my apprentice with excitement and mischief

as I lowered down into a crouch once again. "How about we race back to camp, and I'll show you how *not* tired your mentor is?"

Lilypaw immediately let out an excited gasp and mirrored my position. "You're on! Prepare to be beat!"

No way.

I then forced myself to give my head a violent shake, bringing myself fully into consciousness and focus once again. "Alright. Three, two, one..."

I then pelted forward. "Go!"

It then became a race of the two lilies as our two running blurred figures ran through the forest. Like the two ThunderClan cats we were, the multitude of trees and bushes were no burden to us, and skidding past them was no problem.

The trees blur past as I sprinted through the forest, paws pounding against the slightly damp earth. Lilypaw's gray and white-patched pelt flickered in and out of sight, like a darting squirrel just ahead of me. I forced my legs to keep moving, muscles aching in protest, but the energy just wasn't there, to my complete dismay. *StarClan, when did I get* this *tired?*

"Come on, Lilypetal!" Lilypaw's voice rang out from up ahead, full of teasing and excitement.

I couldn't help but stare ahead of her in bewilderment. She's got the energy of a kit on their first day out of the nursery, I thought to myself.

Meanwhile, I'm struggling to breathe.

I pushed harder, trying to ignore the burn in my chest and the heaviness in my limbs.

The ground slopped upward, roots jutting out like claws, and I nearly tripped on one, catching myself at the last moment. "You're not getting away that easily!" I called out, forcing a purr that felt a bit too strained for my liking.

But contradicting my words, Lilypaw was already pulling ahead, her small paws gliding effortlessly over the forest floor.

I wished I could have said that I was just letting her win, you know, because mentors are supposed to be generous like that, but nope. My legs were about to give out. *But will I let them? No!*

As I leapt over a fallen log, I felt a sharp twinge of frustration rising up like a bramble. *How is she so fast?* I asked myself. *I used to be the best at this, zipping through these woods like* I *was fresh out of the nursery.*

Now, it's like my paws are made of stone.

I began to grit my teeth, trying to push past the exhaustion, but no matter how hard I tried, Lilypaw's gray and white pelt was getting smaller and smaller in the distance.

The edges of my vision were now starting to blur, and I could feel the fatigue creeping into my bones.

So, I was almost thankful to then hear Lilypaw's excited yowl as she reached the top of the ridge first, spinning around to face me with a triumphant grin. I stumble up behind her, panting, trying to hide just how out of breath I was.

"See, I told you I could beat you!" Lilypaw squealed, eyes gleaming with pride. "Wow, I beat the Clan deputy in a race!"

Oh, wow, that does sound bad.

I managed a weak grin, trying to cover my disdain. "Yeah, yeah, don't get too cocky. I'm just... giving you some practice. Gotta keep you on your paws!" *StarClan help me, I'm going to need a nap the moment we get inside of camp.*

I then had to hold back a growl of frustration. But there's no way that can happen. *I've still got an entire day's worth of work ahead!*

I forced myself to give a shake of my fur, and once again, a violent shake of my head to keep myself awake. "Alright," I then breathed as I flashed Lilypaw a proud look, making sure she knew that she

had done a wonderful job. "Amazing work today, Lilypaw, as always, and great job on winning the race!"

I then gave a nod to the brambles and gorse that made up the ThunderClan camp entrance. "Go on in and grab something to eat. I'll be right behind you!"

"Okay!" Lilypaw purred, padding up to me for a moment and touching her nose to mine. "Thank you so much for today, Lilypetal," she then meowed. "You are the most wonderful mentor I could ever ask for."

"Aw, shucks," I purred as I gave my apprentice a quick lick on the head. "Thank you. Now go feast!"

Lilypaw let out a purr, then giving me one last farewell nod before excitedly running through the camp entrance.

I padded just a few pawsteps forward, peering through the tunnel and watching until her tail disappeared from sight.

And as soon as she was gone, I backed up a few pawsteps, sat down, and let out a long, exhausted huff. *The most wonderful mentor she could ask for, huh?* I repeated to myself. *The most wonderful mentors don't lose that easily, I'm sure of it.*

I then let out an annoyed huff. *I suppose I don't even care that I was beaten,* I told myself. *My apprentice being able to beat me is very impressive, and I am so, so proud of Lilypaw's progress, but...*

I still care that I lost, since I lost simply because I was tired.

Tired. Something that I'd unfortunately felt for several days now.

To be honest, since the Dark Forest battle a few quarter moons ago, and since becoming the ThunderClan deputy, sleeping had felt like quite the luxury. As much as I was willing to do it for the rest of my life – this position asked for lots of late nights and early mornings.

And even when I did get time to sleep, it was hard, I had to admit.

Listen, I knew that the worst of everything was behind me – the

Clans were all at peace, the Clans were all safe from the treachery of the Dark Forest cats, my *family* was safe.

And best of all, Ashfur – that treacherous, sicko, crowfood-eating Ashfur – was dead, for good. Dead from this world, and dead from any world. *It's more than I ever could have asked for,* I told myself. *And now, I don't have to live every day so scared, and so angry with what that fox-heart might do. He's gone for good.*

I then managed to feel a strong wave of gratitude and love as I was brought back to the night of Ashfur's last moments – the same night of that intense, life-changing Dark Forest battle. *If it weren't for Snowstorm and Snowflight fulfilling their destiny that night and taking him down for good... I don't know what life would have been like right now.*

I then took a moment to close my eyes and take a deep breath. *Not this wonderful, to say the least,* I then thought. *I am so thankful.*

I then opened my eyes again, but my lids stopped only after they were at a tight narrow. *Then why do I still stir at night? Why am I losing sleep?*

I then let out a huff and gave another violent shake of my head. *It's not worth thinking over right now,* I then told myself. *I don't have time to, even if I wanted to.*

I then gave another shake of my fur, bringing myself to start walking through the bramble camp entrance. *The worst is over now.*

As I eventually made it to the other side of that deep tunnel, I found myself having to squint my eyes and blink for just a moment as the sunlight of the day broke through, eventually clearing and revealing the large, beautiful stone hollow that was the ThunderClan camp, and my home.

And walking into this camp, and seeing all of these cats that I cared about and loved so much, makes all of it – even the worst of times - *all* of it worth it. *And the fact that I get to lead them as their deputy means so much.*

At least when I feel that I'm doing the job correctly.

Because goodness, I still hadn't gotten over the fact that Bramblestar – ThunderClan's newest leader after losing Firestar in the Great Battle – had chosen *me* as his deputy and successor, and apparently had been considering it for a while. *I'm still wondering if it's just a really long-winded joke.*

It was the absolute highest honor, don't get me wrong, and the fact that the rest of the Clan also seemed supportive meant more to me than anything else.

But at the same time, it also felt like little ThunderClan eyeballs were on me. Constantly. I just hoped that I was living up to their expectations.

Which is why, I knew, sleeping was the *last* thing I could do right now, as much as I needed to.

So, putting on the most energetic demeanor that I could, I began to pad through the ravine, my head held high as I greeted my Clanmates. Lilypaw was already settled next to Seedpaw sharing a meal near the Highledge, some of the senior warriors – Cloudtail, Dustpelt and Brackenfur were chatting near the warriors den...

I then quickly caught sight of the golden brown tabby pelt of my firstborn daughter, Goldenshine, walking into the medicine den with Mousewhisker and Dustystorm behind her, all with herbs in their mouths. *Oh, how that Jayfeather loves to send my daughter out to get herbs for him...*

I then let out a purr as my gaze then fell on the three pelts of my second litter – Wrenfeather, Lightningstrike, and Emberheart, who were all surrounding Brightheart's most recent litter of kits.

"Alright," I heard Wrenfeather meow firmly to the three kits in front of him, "It's three against three – what are you all going to do first?"

"Choose carefully!" Emberheart then purred, giving the kits a wink.

I then myself had to hold back a purr as I watched the three kits simply exchange looks with each other – looking utterly lost and

confused.

"Uh..." I then heard little Snowkit mew. "Is there a right answer?"

Lightningstrike then let out a snort. "Here's a hint – don't just stand there," my son told the kits, his yellow eyes gleaming with humor and his whiskers twitching. "It's an even playing field, so each cat gets an opponent!"

I then widened my eyes back at Lightningstrike in warning, and he luckily caught my gaze at the same moment. "At least, if this were *real*," Lightningstrike corrected himself before looking back at the kits. "Which this is *not*."

"Exactly," Emberheart purred as she gave her brother a nudge. "Let's stick to playful nudges and light hitting with sheathed paws."

"Exactly what I was going to say!" Lightningstrike then meowed with a sharp nod before looking up at me again. "Are you seeing this, mother? Is this good stuff? Is Bramblestar going to make me a mentor when these kits become apprentices?"

"Good grief," Wrenfeather then muttered.

"*Us*, you mean?" Emberheart then murmured.

"Sure, right," Lightningstrike replied, flashing his siblings a teasing, affectionate look. He then looked back over to me. "Put in a good word for us!"

Before I could even answer, I flicked my ears as I saw a white pelt approach my three kits, and I let out another purr as I immediately recognized Snowstorm giving Lightningstrike an amused, skeptical look. "You realize that being a mentor requires *training*, right?" she then murmured to him.

As Lightningstrike's mouth dropped open, Wrenfeather and Emberheart let out quiet *mrrows* of laughter, while the kits more reflected Lightningstrike's expression. "Hey!" he then retorted, though there was laughter in his voice. "Who says I wouldn't train my apprentice? I'd train!"

Snowstorm then rolled her eyes and gave Lightningstrike a flick on the ear, causing his eyes to begin gleaming. "I know, mouse-brain, but I still think Bramblestar and Lilypetal should proceed with caution," she purred. "But anyway, do any of you know where Swiftflight is?"

Lightningstrike didn't move, but Emberheart and Wrenfeather both gave a nod. "I think he went out hunting with Cherryfall earlier," Wrenfeather murmured. "I guess they're still gone."

Snowstorm let out a purr and began to slowly shake her head. I then let out a sniff as she exchanged a glance with me. "Should have known. I'll catch up with that love-sick cat later then."

Oh, love-sick indeed, I thought to myself fondly, still so, so thankful that my daughter's kit who had once been so cold and unwilling to connect with anybody had managed to find the sweetest, most wonderful mate that he clearly cared about so much. *There were plenty of factors, but that Cherryfall definitely brought him back down to earth.*

Snowstorm then proceeded to nod to my three youngest kits, touching her nose to Emberheart's briefly. "See you all! Good luck training these rascals."

Then, as Snowstorm began to pad off towards Jayfeather and Leafpool's den, Lightningstrike's gaze seemed to continue to follow her pelt. "Bye..." he meowed probably too quietly for her to hear, his eyes still glittering.

"What are you staring off at her for?" Emberheart purred as she gave her brother another nudge. "We've got kits to teach!"

"Yeah!" Snowkit cried out as his two siblings squealed.

Lightningstrike's eyes widened, and he then proceeded to give a big shake of his head. *Just like his mother...* "Sorry!" he meowed sharply, truly seeming to be back in focus. "Let's do it!"

Fascinating...

I then pulled myself away from my thoughts as the black tom

glanced back over at me for just a moment. "Remember what I said, mother!"

I let out a purr of amusement. "Sure thing, my love. I'll put in a good word for all of you!" I called out to my precious kits as I began to pad towards the Highledge. "Hopefully I won't be biased!"

Luckily, as soon as I turned around to face the Highledge, my gaze immediately fell on the dark brown tabby pelt of ThunderClan's leader – and *my* commander-in-chief, I suppose – Bramblestar, who was chatting under the shade of the rock with his mate and my best friend, Squirrelflight. *Part of the reason why I got into the whole Ashfur mess in the first place,* I recalled as a shiver ran down my spine. *But again, infinitely worth it.*

Green eyes and amber eyes then fell on me as I approached them, and I lashed my tail at the two of them in greeting. "Hey, you two!" I meowed to them, then letting out a purr as Squirrelflight let out an excited squeal and touched her nose to me. "Just returned from training with Lilypaw. Is..."

I then had to give a shake of my fur to cover up the yawn that dared tried to creep up in my jaws. "Is there anything you need me to do right now, Bramblestar?"

"Oh! I have something!" Squirrelflight blurted out just as Bramblestar was opening his mouth. "Drop everything and hang out with me."

"Oh! Nice try," Bramblestar meowed, flashing his mate a warning but amused look as he nudged her on the shoulder with his tail. "Actually, since the Gathering is tonight, would you like to select some cats to go, Lilypetal?"

Bramblestar then let out a purr as he noticed my eyes immediately widen with alarm. "I trust your judgement," he reassured me. "Make your picks and then report to me later. Also,"

My eyes widened more, my heart already pounding in my ears at the thought of having full power of picking who would go to tonight's Gathering. "I know we have a border patrol out right now

checking out the area around ShadowClan, but I'm thinking I'd like another to go out to check out the WindClan border."

The ThunderClan leader then exchanged a somewhat nervous glance with Squirrelflight. "I'm sure we'll find something out at the Gathering tonight, but tensions seem to be rising over there, for whatever reason. I think we need to make sure that everything is okay."

For a moment, I simply shook my head in amazement, forgetting about my nerves for a bit as a realized just how Firestar-like Bramblestar already was. "Sure thing!" I purred enthusiastically to my leader, hiding my nerves as much as I could. "I'm on both of those things."

"Thank you, Lilypetal," Bramblestar meowed, his amber eyes full of genuine gratitude as he gave me a nod. "I know that's a lot, but I know you can do it."

Goodness, can I?

I nodded back to the leader, trying to keep my fur flat. "That means so, so much, thank you, and I'll see you two later today!" I then turned around and began to walk deeper into camp, honestly having no idea where my destination was at first. "And Squirrelflight and I will just have to hang out behind your back later, I guess!"

"Ooo, we can just stay up late and talk in our nests at moonhigh!" Squirrelflight called out behind me, her voice full of laughter.

I then heard Bramblestar let out a groan. "There are other times for you two to speak with each other, you know!"

"Apparently not! We could right now, but *no* – she has to be a deputy!"

I then let out a purr of amusement to myself as their lighthearted bickering fell out of my earshot.

But as soon as it did, the tasks in front of me and their gravity hit me all over again – one of them in particular. *I have to choose what*

cats are going to the Gathering tonight? That's a big deal!

Although it was still a bit daunting, picking cats for a patrol was routine for me now. *And after all, I think I already know who I'm picking for it, and it includes me...*

But since becoming deputy, I'd never had to select cats for the Gathering. Why was it bugging me so much? *Because I want to pick the right cats, I suppose,* I thought. *But what is the "right" cat to go to the Gathering?*

I then began to shake my head slowly as I scanned my eyes around the camp. *Goodness, does Bramblestar have a lot of faith in me,* I thought to myself. Don't get me wrong, Bramblestar had been a brilliant leader since he stepped up – he led his Clan with such grace and confidence, and it truly was an honor that he had faith in me. *But I don't want to fail him.*

I then took a deep breath. *And I won't. Right?*

Well, here we go. Let's speedrun this.

First, I approached Brightheart, Cloudtail and Brackenfur. They were good to go. Off to a good start.

Jayfeather and Leafpool were also automatics, of course.

I then approached Dustpelt, who was now near the medicine den licking one of his healing Dark Forest wounds. "Hi, Dustpelt!" I tried to purr to the older tom enthusiastically. "Interested in going to the Gathering tonight?"

To my surprise, the tom had let out a frustrated huff. "No, I am not interested," he muttered to me. "Do you not see this wound on my leg? It's gotten infected two different times, and if I try to walk on it, it just might fall off."

"Yikes, that does look rough..." I murmured, and when Dustpelt gave me an alarmed look, I flicked my ears back at him. "I mean, I'm so sorry! I should have known. Yes, please rest up tonight."

"Thanks for giving me permission," Dustpelt meowed coldly, his

voice full of bitterness before he continued to tend to his wound.

Bit of a mistake on my part with that one, but I tried to push on.

I asked my daughter, Goldenshine, who of course was more than willing. "Darn right I'm coming!" my daughter purred, her enthusiasm lifting up my spirits just a bit. "Would never miss it."

"Wonderful," I meowed in reply, giving her a quick lick on the cheek. "Would Dustystorm or Nightwing like to come too?"

Goldenshine immediately gave me an eager nod. "Oh, I'd drag Dustystorm even if he for some outrageous reason didn't want to go, and I'll ask Nightwing when she gets back from her walk in the forest!"

"Walk in the forest?" I pressed my daughter, my deputy curiosity for my Clanmates beginning to rise. "Is she with the patrol, or is she just taking a stroll?" *Ha, that rhymed.*

"I think she's out on her own. She does that sometimes," Goldenshine explained to me. "But she'll be so excited to hear that *my mother the deputy* invited her to the Gathering. Count us all in!"

"Perfect!" I purred to her, flashing her a bashful look. I then found myself having to shake my head to "shake" myself awake again. "I'll tell Bramblestar soon."

And like the quick, brilliant she-cat that she was, she knew what that meant for me. "Are you alright, mother? You seem a bit tired."

I tilted my head back at her, still trying to hide my fatigue from others. "What makes you think that? Because I shook my head?"

Goldenshine let out an amused snort. "Your tired eyes also kind of give it away..."

Give to Goldenshine to always be brutally honest.

I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes. "Life of a deputy, my love," I told her quickly. "Anyway,"

I then gave the golden brown tabby she-cat a lick on her head before beginning to pad away. "I've got to speak to some more cats, so I'll see you later. I love you!"

"Love you too!" Goldenshine called out to me. "Rest up tonight!"

That's funny.

I then ran into Spiderleg, who was just leaving the nursery when I passed it. "Hi, Spiderleg!" I greeted him brightly, hoping some positivity would burn out all of the nastiness he might show me. "Would you like to go to the Gathering tonight?"

Not to my surprise at all, the dark brown tom let out a snort, and he rolled his amber eyes. "Since when do you get to ask me that?"

I narrowed my eyes back at him. "Since Bramblestar told me to? Since he chose me as deputy?" I pressed to him. "You didn't answer my question."

"For StarClan's sake! Yes, I'm coming," Spiderleg muttered. "Thanks for the invite, O *Deputy."*

"I appreciate the curtesy," I sighed as I then began to walk away. "Okay, I'm leaving now."

"Such a shame."

I shot the cranky tom one last bitter look before walking away deeper into camp once again.

And after also consulting Lionblaze, Sandstorm, Dovewing, and Ivypool, I returned to Bramblestar to give him my list.

Speedrun over. "... Thornclaw, Brackenfur... Cloudtail... and that's it. Oh, wait!" I meowed to Bramblestar as I was running over all of the different cats I had selected. "What about Lilypaw too? I know that she was *more* than excited to go to the Gathering the last time."

To my surprise, Bramblestar immediately shook his head from his resting spot right outside of his den on the Highledge. "That sounds like a wonderful idea, but since Lilypaw just went to the Gathering

last full moon, I think it should be a couple before she gets to go to another one," the ThunderClan leader explained to me. "I mean, you know this – apprentices need to understand the privilege it is to go to the Gathering."

Shoot! It was just a moon ago that Lilypaw went, wasn't it? Whoops. I immediately nodded back at the dark brown tabby tom in understanding. "Got it. No worries," I meowed evenly. "That's..."

I then found myself having to take a deep breath. "That's all I had."

Bramblestar gave me a single nod of approval. "Sounds great, Lilypetal. Thank you," the tom purred. "You know the drill, we'll begin heading out right as the moon begins to rise. Take a break until then!"

Break? I've forgotten the word. After another deep breath, I nodded back to my leader. "Oh, will do! Thank you, and see you later!"

I then made my swift leap off of the Highledge, taking no shortcuts and leaping from the top straight to the stone hollow floor. *At least I didn't mess that up.*

Practically as soon as my paws touched the ground, I lied down right where I was, the warm stone hollow floor warming my belly, and the soon-to-be setting sun warming up my back.

I tucked my paws until my chest, proceeding to let out one long, exhausted huff. That had been a *lot* to say the least, and the fact that I hadn't done it perfectly wasn't going to haunt me for days.

I then forced myself to take a deep breath. *Calm down. Take this time to get your bearings.*

"Hey, stranger."

My ears flicked and my heart suddenly seemed to flutter out of my chest at the voice that I heard next to me, and I found myself immediately jumping up from my spot.

And for a moment, all of my worries seemed to disintegrate like morning fog once my gaze fell on my favorite pair of beautiful,

comforting pale blue eyes. *Just like he always does, and has for so, so many moons now.* "Stranger?" I repeated to the tom in front of me. "Well, brace yourself for a stranger coming up and smothering you!"

I ran forward, a purr rising in my throat as I touched my muzzle to my mate's. "Hi there, Thornclaw," I meowed warmly, now digging my head into the golden brown tabby tom's chest.

My stomach then seemed to twist up in the best way when Thornclaw let out a small chuckle and wrapped his tail around my back. "Wow, this is a lot for a stranger," he teased me. "Thanks for giving me a heads-up."

After the two of us exchanged another purr, I then felt my mate give me a lick on the head. "Hi there, Lilypetal," he then meowed to me. "Oh, I missed you today so much."

"I missed you too," I purred Thornclaw, pulling away so that I could look into his eyes. "Is that what warranted the 'stranger' comment?"

"Of course! It feels like it's been *moons* – you might as well be a stranger!"

"StarClan forbid!" I meowed, flicking Thornclaw on the ear with my tail. "How was the border patrol? Anything suspicious?"

Thornclaw immediately shook his head, but I saw his nose wrinkle just slightly. "Nope. Just the typical ShadowClan stink."

"Aw, your life is so hard," I teased my mate, nuzzling his head with my tail. "Alright, I've got a couple more questions for you."

Thornclaw shook his head. "Sorry, I've limited questions to just one a day."

"Thornclaw."

"Okay, shoot," he then purred to me, his eyes gleaming with humor.

"Thank you," I meowed back to Thornclaw, my eyes narrowed but a large smirk on my face. "First, I assume you'd like to go to the Gathering tonight?"

"Count me in!" Thornclaw said in a way that sounded so much like Goldenshine had said it that it warmed my heart.

"Perfect, thank goodness," I purred to him. "And secondly, do you like going on border patrols back to back?"

Thornclaw let out a sniff. "Have you met me?" he meowed to me with laughter in his voice. "You know I'd be glad to. How come?"

"I knew it wasn't even worth asking," I told my mate affectionately before I narrowed my eyes, beginning to scan the camp once again to search for some of the other cats on my radar. "Well, Bramblestar says that he wants to send out another patrol to check out the WindClan border. Apparently there might be some suspicious activity?"

Thornclaw's pale blue eyes immediately began to gleam with curiosity. "Oh, I am *more* than glad to come then," Thornclaw told me sharply, his gaze now gleaming with determination. "Who else are you sending?"

I let out a sniff. "Myself, for one."

"Thank StarClan."

I flashed the tom an amused, fake-annoyed look. "But I was also thinking about bringing along Goldenshine, Swiftflight, and maybe Snowstorm too?" I was glad to immediately see Thornclaw's nod of approval. "Sure, we actually do need to check the border, but I don't think all of us have been able to get together that much since the Dark Forest chaos ensued." *And then my own chaos ensued...*

"Oh, I couldn't agree more! Let's do it!" Thornclaw purred. He then began to scan around the camp with me. "Are all of them here and accounted for?"

"Goldenshine was helping Jayfeather with herbs, Snowstorm is around here somewhere, and I was told that Swiftflight is hunting out with Cherryfall."

"Shocker."

"Right?"

"Imagine hunting with your mate all of the time," Thornclaw then murmured, his eyes glowing with humor.

"I know. The insanity of that," I then meowed sarcastically as I licked Thornclaw's ear. "Speaking off, since we haven't had our hunting trip today, do you want to do that after the border patrol?"

"Always," Thornclaw purred to me softly. I then watched as he looked over at the camp entrance, his ears flicking. "Ah, there's Swiftflight!"

I followed Thornclaw's gaze, and sure enough, I immediately recognized the dark gray pelt of Swiftflight crawling through the camp entrance, the ginger tabby pelt of his mate, Cherryfall, just behind him. They both had a surplus of prey in their mouths, and as soon as they arrived in the stone hollow, Swiftflight took the prey from Cherryfall's jaws and touched his nose to hers in farewell. He then began to pad up to the fresh-kill pile, giving Thornclaw and I a nod in greeting before dropping all of the catches onto the pile.

He then gave a lash of his tail and padded up to the two of us – his demeanor strong and dignified, and his gray-blue gaze full of genuine warmth. "Hey," he meowed to the both of us. He then lashed his tail to the fresh-kill pile. "Do you think that's enough to feed the Clan tonight, Lilypetal?"

I let out a sniff, pretending to stare down the new additions to the fresh-kill pile. "Hm. You're just about one short," I teased my kin, bringing him to roll his eyes. "I think I'm going to have to punish you by making you go on a border patrol with me, Thornclaw, Goldenshine and Snowstorm."

Swiftflight let out a sniff as well as he began to shake his head. "Oh, my legs are shaking in fear already!" he meowed sarcastically, but his gleaming eyes told another story. "Which border?"

"WindClan!"

"Ah, my favorite one," Swiftflight sighed as he sat down and

wrapped his tail around his paws, his eyes narrowed. "I'm sure Goldenshine will be thrilled about it too."

"Oh, you two are stronger and better than... *anything* that you may encounter at the border," I reassured my kin, well aware of the history that my daughter and her son shared with WindClan. And how that history with a certain black tom with amber eyes turned incredibly sour... "Are you alright with going?"

Swiftflight gave a single sharp nod. "Of course."

"Great," I purred to Swiftflight, pride for the younger tom rising in my heart. "If you could, grab Snowstorm for me, and Thornclaw, go find our daughter!" I then told the two toms.

"Wish me luck trying to find that slippery rascal!" Thornclaw called back to me.

I glanced back at my mate and let out a purr, and I then turned around back towards the Highledge, ready to tell Bramblestar that our patrol had been put together. *The best patrol I could ever stand alongside – family or not,* I thought to myself as love and affection rushed through my blood. And for one of the first times today, I felt uplifted and awake. *After all we've been through together, some more time with them is exactly what I need right now.*

Chapter 2

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

It already felt like old times as the five of us traveled through the ThunderClan forest. Sure, any time that we assembled together before had actually been to discuss that idiot Ashfur, or dealing with the arrival of the Dark Forest, Snowstorm, or something else dire, but to actually be able to take an expedition together *without* the prompting of impending doom was actually quite nice. *And almost too good to be true,* I thought to myself.

I then let out an almost in audible snort as the first traces of WindClan scent began to flood through my nose. *Well, I suppose checking the WindClan border isn't the most pleasant thing the five of us could be doing,* I realized. *All of us have somewhat harsher memories associated with it...*

After all, the WindClan border – close to the end of it where the stream met the waterfall that drummed down to the lake – was the place that I had lured Ashfur just short of a moon ago. *Where I brought him down, and then Snowstorm finished him off,* I thought as a chill ran down my spine. *And like the fantastic cats that they were, Goldenshine, Thornclaw and Swiftflight came to help the two of us back to camp.*

I then let out a sigh and closed my eyes. *Wow...* I thought to myself, taking a quick glance at Snowstorm, who was walking by herself and scanning the clearing. *The both of us really, really risked our lives that night. I might not be here right now if she hadn't saved me.*

I then looked up to the sky, my heart filling with love as I tried to imagine the cats of StarClan – one in particular – staring down at us from above. And I will forever be grateful to my daughter for that. *Oh, how I miss you every day, Snowflight.*

I could still hardly believe that my daughter's spirit – after being

taken away by that sick Ashfur – had preserved itself in the form of Snowstorm, who had carried my daughter's spirit up until just moments after Ashfur's disappeared forever. But now – she was safe and happy up in StarClan, and had fulfilled her destiny of getting rid of the shadow that had casted over our entire family.

And while I was forever relieved that that shadow was gone – that shadow that had constantly threatened to take away everything I cared about, simply because I wanted to expose him for who he truly was; a sick cat who wanted to ruin my friend's life – I wondered if it was something I'd ever be able to fully move on from. *After moons and moons of torment, I suppose it would be hard... and it is, just a bit.*

At that thought, I couldn't help but let out a sigh as we continued to pad through the trees. And of course, Thornclaw, who was right next to me, heard it and was already staring at me with deep, concerned pale blue eyes. "Are you alright?" he asked me calmly as he brushed his tail along my shoulder.

I turned my head to look back at him, my heart already wanting to explode with gratitude. "Yes, I promise that I am. Thank you," I reassured him. I then let out another sigh as I took a quick glance around the forest. The oak trees were already turning into the thin birch trees that surrounded the WindClan border, and I also could just barely hear the flowing stream and the thundering waterfall up ahead. "Just... reminiscing, I suppose?"

I then heard Goldenshine let out a snort in front of me from where she was walking next to Swiftflight. "Goodness, reminiscing is a word for it, I guess!" she purred.

Swiftflight looked at his mother and gave a shrug. "I'd say it is – Ashfur was *killed* for *good* around here," he meowed, repeating my own thoughts. He then gave a nod to me, and then to Snowstorm. "Thanks to you two."

Snowstorm narrowed her eyes and gave her friend a teasing look. "Oh, stop kissing up," she teased to him.

Swiftflight's eyes widened back at the white she-cat. "Kissing up?

What reason would I have to kiss up to you?"

Snowstorm cocked a single eyebrow. "After your time as an apprentice, I'd think you'd want to."

All of us except Swiftflight let out *mrrows* of amusement, while the dark gray tom narrowed his eyes back at his friend. "Hilarious," he seemed to mutter half to himself. "Anyway, I was serious. Thanks to you two, Ashfur is..."

All of us immediately shot our gazes to Swiftflight when he paused in his words for a moment, and waited for him to go on. "...is gone," he eventually finished, proceeding to give a shake of his fur.

"What was that?" Goldenshine asked her son, her gray eyes full of suspicion and concern.

"Nothing!" Swiftflight immediately insisted, his eyes widening.

Goldenshine immediately shook her head. "Nope. If we're going to continue to talk about your apprenticeship, we later found out that 'nothing' was always typically 'something.'"

"But it *is* nothing, I promise!" Swiftflight went on, and just by the urgent and worried look in his eyes, I was sure (or maybe just hopeful) that he was serious. "I hesitated because... well, I still have dreams... *nightmares* about it all sometimes."

Nightmares?

"Do you?" I pressed to my kin, my eyes immediately widening and my heart beating faster at his words.

"Unfortunately," Swiftflight breathed, and with those words, I think the tense energy and the potential fear of Swiftflight going back to his past ways completely left. "Sometimes I still see that creepy, evil, blue-eyed dark entity in my sleep."

"That's completely understandable," I immediately told Swiftflight. "I mean, it was still just a few moons ago that you were his apprentice, after all. It's all still so fresh."

"Exactly," Goldenshine chimed in. "Stupidly, but it's true."

"I know, I know," Swiftflight murmured as he gave a roll of his eyes. "And I know that it's all over, and he's dead, but, the nightmares are still a lot, you know?"

As all of the other cats simply nodded to him in understanding, I found I could only stare back at him as my heart continued to pound in my ears. "These nightmares remind me that after all we've been through..."

I then flicked my ears as Swiftflight's gaze met mine, his blue gray eyes full of sympathy, but also the slightest bit of questioning in them. "...he's never fully going to be gone."

Another chill ran down my spine at my kin's words. *Ain't that the truth...*

"No one could have said it better," Thornclaw meowed, and I let out a purr when I felt my mate wrap his tail around my back in support. I stepped closer to him, nuzzling my head into his neck fur for just a moment.

"Agreed," Goldenshine then meowed. I then was surprised to hear her let out a sniff. "I mean, Lilypetal still looks as stressed and tired as she did when Ashfur was still alive!"

I let out a small hiss and immediately pulled my head away from Goldenshine. "Hey!" I called out to my daughter as I tried to push down anger.

"Goldenshine, not cool," Thornclaw then meowed sharply.

Goldenshine widened her eyes back at me. "It was supposed to be a joke!" she insisted.

"I'm not laughing," I muttered to her as I narrowed my eyes.

"Neither am I," Thornclaw immediately meowed after me. "Yes, surely Lilypetal is busy with her deputy duties, and – like Swiftflight – is freshly out of dealing with a crowfood-eating demon, but..."

Thornclaw then paused and nodded to me, bringing me to feel a wave of gratitude. *He's letting me speak for myself... ugh, he is the best.* "...*But* I'd rather not be told that I look like a thrush running around with its head missing."

Goldenshine let out a sigh, and luckily her eyes were apologetic. "You don't – in fact, you look fantastic. You always do."

"I concur," Thornclaw meowed to me, causing me to let out a purr and give him a quick lick on the cheek.

"I just meant that you probably haven't had much time to process everything," Goldenshine explained, her words sounding completely sincere. "Of course you look a little stressed and tired still, but I'm not judging you for it. It's normal!"

"Okay, now *you're* kissing up," I purred. When Goldenshine let out an offended gasp, I gave her a reassuring look and padded up to her so that I could touch my muzzle to her flank. "But thank you for explaining, Goldenshine. I see what you mean." *But I hate that you are so right...*

"I do too. About *all* of us," Snowstorm then meowed. "I mean, of course Swifty is having nightmares, and Lilypetal still is affected by it all-"

"What did you just call me?" Swiftflight cut it.

"But it's times like this that can give us... closure, I guess?" Another chill then ran down my spine as Snowstorm gestured forward, and I followed her gaze to see the stream and the waterfall in front of us, and the lake just slightly in view. "Well, here we are."

"Here we are," Swiftflight breathed, padding to the front of our group. "Hasn't really been touched since all five of us were here last, huh?"

"Yeah..." I breathed, frozen in my spot for a moment as I took in the space. Truly – it hadn't changed much at all. The shrubs and trees around had barely been touched, of course, the stream and waterfall were still flowing...

And best of all, there was that darned fallen birch tree that stretched across the stream, along with the one that Thornclaw pushed down after I messed with the one that Ashfur and I had been on. *That same one we had our final confrontation on... when he told me he wasn't going to change... before we fought to the death.*

I then gave a quick shake of my head, almost as if to stop myself from diving into these dark thoughts. *Wow, Goldenshine is right...* I thought to myself. *It's all still so fresh... I really haven't been able to process it all fully.*

In fact, I found I was having to keep my tail from twitching nervously as the five of us began to look around the area. Swiftflight and Snowstorm were sniffing out some of the shrubs while Goldenshine and Thornclaw were close to the waterfall and stream, staring down at the rumbling water.

"Great StarClan, that was quite a plan that you put together, Lilypetal," Thornclaw called out to me, bringing me to join my mate and my daughter at the stream. "I seriously don't know if anything else could have worked."

"I know," Goldenshine then sighed. "Imagine being so blinded by a crush that you can't think rationally."

Thornclaw and I both slowly turned our heads to give Goldenshine a narrowed-eyed stare.

She widened her eyes and immediately took a step away from her parents. "Excuse *me*! If I wasn't stupid, Swiftflight wouldn't be here right now!"

"That is true," I heard Swiftflight mutter.

"Thanks for being stupid," Snowstorm purred, nudging Swiftflight as he let out a sniff.

"But seriously," Goldenshine went on as she flashed me and Thornclaw a warning, annoyed look. "Squirrelflight was the key to getting Ashfur here, but you somehow had to keep him here after he found out it was all a ploy."

"Well, thank you!" I purred to my daughter. I then began to slowly shake my head. "It took moons of planning. It was so surreal actually getting to put it to action that night."

"*Everything* about that night was surreal," Swiftflight then meowed. The dark gray tom then let out a sigh and closed his eyes. "All of the cats we had to lose. Foxleap..."

Goldenshine flashed her son a wide-eyed look full of sympathy as she placed the tip of her tail on his shoulder. "Hollyleaf..." she then sighed.

"Ferncloud..." Snowstorm then meowed.

I then found myself letting out a shaky sigh. "...Firestar," I then murmured just barely above a whisper. *The greatest leader ThunderClan could have had,* I thought to myself as everyone around grew silent for a moment and dipped their heads. *And while everyone in the Clan – his family, especially – will experience this loss so deeply, I am still grieving a lot. He was such a guide for me as I found my way here... after Mistpelt died...*

I then began to shake my head, simultaneously exchanging a melancholy glance with Thornclaw – who, as always, seemed to know what I was thinking. *Another wonderful soul that meant more to me than anything. Oh, how I miss you, mother.*

A chill then ran down my spine as I continued to think of the gray fluffy she-cat, and all of the dreams she had sent me when I was in my darkest moments, when I felt so lost. *Would I fully have had the courage to go after Ashfur without them?* I asked myself. I then narrowed my eyes as I scanned them around the clearing, my eyes resting for a bit on each that was around.

And only after a moment, I gave a quick nod to myself, my heart swelling with love. *Of course I would have,* I then thought. *But her dreams made me remember what it truly meant to be a warrior, as corny as it would sound to anyone. It meant so much to me.*

I then was pulled out of my thoughts as Goldenshine padded up to Thornclaw and I, beckoning Swiftflight and Snowstorm over with

her tail as well. "Oh, enough sadness," my daughter breathed – her eyes glossy as she clearly tried to force back her own grief. "What did Bramblestar want us to look for, Lilypetal?"

I gave a quick shake of my head, also bringing myself back into focus. "Right," I then meowed sharply as I gave a nod. I then let out a snort. "Honestly, he didn't clarify. He just said he's sensed some tension from WindClan cats that he's run into, and that he thinks something may be going on."

"I'm not sure if tension is necessarily something that's unwarranted right now... for *any* Clan," Swiftflight murmured as he glanced at the border. "We were all fighting some evil ghost cats around a moon ago, weren't we?"

"True," Snowstorm then meowed as she seemed to be suppressing laughter. "However, that doesn't mean that evil ghost cats are the only thing that will *ever* bring the Clans negative emotions from here on out."

Of course, Swiftflight let out a sigh and rolled his eyes. "Wow, that *never* would have occurred to me. Thank you," the dark gray tom muttered icily. He then narrowed his gray-blue eyes and raised his muzzle to the air. "...Huh..." he then murmured.

"What's up?" Thornclaw then meowed, his own pale blue eyes narrowing as he brushed past me and walked up to Swiftflight.

"I definitely am catching something a bit weird," my kin replied. He then trotted up closer to the stream. "Aside from WindClan's border markers..."

I then let out an amused snort as Goldenshine wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, it smells like they set those down just a little while ago."

As my daughter was speaking, I couldn't help but give a flick of my ears after having taken a whiff of the air myself. "I... think I smell it too. Hold on."

I padded up to join Swiftflight at the stream, gaping my mouth open to fully try and grasp the scents around us.

What I was able to detect immediately made my stomach twist. "Weird..." I then murmured half to myself. "I think it's an animal, but it's nothing that I've ever smelled before." *And I guess something I never wanted to smell,* I thought to myself. *Gosh, does that smell odd.*

I then heard Thornclaw let out a snort behind me, and just a moment later, he was on the other side of me in front of the stream. "After the two different kinds of lives you've lived, that intrigues me..." my mate meowed before taking a sniff himself.

The four of us watched him with intrigue, anxious to hear what the most seasoned ThunderClan warrior – and the one who was the most border-patrol'd - out of all of us would have to say.

I couldn't help but flick my ears as I watched him give a flick of his tail and furrow his eyebrows. "Well, I think this one is stumping me too."

"I'm utterly confused!" Goldenshine purred as she gave a shrug.

"Maybe Snowflight had some idea, but I haven't got that to rely on anymore," Snowstorm then meowed as she exchanged an amused glance with Goldenshine. She then padded up closer to the stream and took another sniff. "Whatever it was, it hasn't been around here – or *close* to here in a while."

"I agree," I then meowed, giving a nod of gratitude to Snowstorm. "But nevertheless, I think this is enough to report back to Bramblestar."

"Definitely," Thornclaw agreed. "A strange animal would definitely be enough to bring an entire Clan some tension. Let's head back."

I let out a snort, flashing my mate a dramatically shocked, yet amused look. "Who died and made you leader of this patrol?" I teased to my mate as I gave him a flick on the ear.

I then had to suppress laughter as the golden brown tabby tom gave me an "annoyed" look through narrowed eyes. "My self-awareness, apparently," Thornclaw then muttered, and as I let out a *mrrow* of laughter, he let out a sigh and gave a nod to me. "Do you think

we've found out what we needed to, Lilypetal?"

"Oh, yes," I purred. "I just wanted to be the one to say it."

And after I affectionately nuzzled Thornclaw's ear, I lashed my tail to the rest of the patrol – all of which were quietly purring with amusement – gesturing for them to follow me. "Let's go. Soon enough we'll all be heading to the Gathering, anyway!"

"After our hunting trip though!" Thornclaw then purred. I then flicked my ears with intrigue as he put his muzzle up to my ear. "Part of the reason why I'm anxious to get back to camp," he then whispered to me.

As I rolled my eyes and gave my mate an affectionate nudge, I heard Goldenshine let out a long, dramatic sigh. "Geez, I know that cats are supposed to be embarrassed by their parents..." Goldenshine began, and I turned around and purred as I saw her wrinkled nose. "But not like this."

"Oh, just be happy your parents love each other," I teased to Goldenshine through narrowed eyes.

Goldenshine sighed and gave a roll of her eyes. "You got me there," she then breathed. "I do agree though, let's go – I still need to check in with Nightwing and Dustystorm about coming to the Gathering tonight!"

"And I need to fix up me and Cherryfall's nest," Swiftflight then meowed, and I couldn't help but feel so much warmth in my heart when I saw how much his eyes gleamed. "I want it to be fresh and soft when we both get back tonight."

I then purred with amusement as I then noticed Snowstorm's wide blue eyes staring back at her best friend. Then, after a moment, she slowly turned her head to look at Goldenshine. "It's Lilypetal and Thornclaw you're worried about?"

"Shut up," Swiftflight then muttered, his teeth barred. He then slowly began to shake his head and pad forward. "Let's go."

All of us then shared more small purrs of amusement before finally

making our trek back home. And as we did so, a soft glimmer of excitement seemed to tug at my whiskers. Hunting with Thornclaw —just the two of us, no apprentices tagging along or patrols to organize—felt like a tiny sliver of peace in my otherwise chaotic life. And StarClan knew, I could use a break from being "Lilypetal, ThunderClan's Stressed-Out Deputy."

I glanced at Thornclaw as we trotted side by side, his golden brown tabby pelt shining under the patches of sunlight that slipped through the tree canopies. He caught me looking and flashed a playful gaze my way, making my heart skip a beat.

The forest was thick with the earthy scents of leaf-fall, crisp and comforting, and I tried to soak it in, to breathe in the life around me and leave my worries behind. Again, I was with the cats around me that I cared about the most, and I was about to get a break and spend some time with one of the cats most precious to me, that I loved more than anything else. *And it is these hunting trips with him that partly keep me sane.*

But as we padded deeper into the trees, out of *nowhere*, I felt my chest begin to tighten. Shadows seemed to stretch longer, swallowing up the bright, familiar places between the roots and brambles. There was a heaviness, an eerie stillness, as though every tree was suddenly watching me – their gazes practically weighing down on my back.

Oh no, oh no. Not this again!

I closed my eyes, willing myself to calm down – the only thing I could ever think to do in these situations, of course.

"Why is it so wrong for me to do something nice for Cherryfall?" Swiftflight seemed to be asking Snowstorm, his tail flicking as he scanned the dense underbrush.

"It's not at all! In fact, it's absolutely precious," Snowstorm reassured her friend, her whiskers twitching as she nudged him playfully. "I just... can't believe it. If I had once told you that you'd be acting like this, your *vomit* would be vomiting."

"That's... really gross," Swiftflight replied bitterly, though there was a hint of humor in his voice. "I think that Jayfeather needs to take a look at you."

Snowstorm swatted him with a purr of amusement. I couldn't help but let out a small purr myself, their banter pulling me back to the present, slightly easing the tightness in my chest.

But the tranquility didn't last. The shadows between the trees grew thicker, stretching long and ominous across the forest floor, and a chill prickled down my spine. I glanced around, hoping to shake off the unease, but it clung to me like a second pelt.

"Lilypetal?" Thornclaw's voice now broke through the growing fog in my mind. He was watching me, his pale blue gaze warm but cautious. "Everything alright?"

I opened my mouth to answer, to reassure him that I was fine, but the words caught in my throat as a dark figure slipped through the undergrowth, barely visible in the corner of my eye. My heart stuttered. The figure moved closer, and I could feel an intense, burning stare boring into me, colder than the leaf-fall air around us.

Ashfur.

No, it couldn't be. I was just imagining things, *clearly*.

But his face swam before me, twisted with hatred and a rage so fierce it left me breathless. I took a step back, eyes wide as I watched the vision unfold. He was prowling toward us, his eyes fixed not on me, but on Goldenshine. The dark shadow of his form closed in on my daughter, his claws unsheathed and gleaming in the half-light.

No... no, not her this time!

"Lilypetal?" Thornclaw's voice sharpened, tinged with concern, but it felt distant, muffled, like I was under water.

"Get away from her," I breathed, frozen in place. My claws dug into the ground as I fought against the urge to leap forward, to protect Goldenshine from the danger I could see creeping closer, though no

one else seemed to notice it.

Goldenshine stopped walking and turned, her eyes narrowing in worry, yet she didn't seem to see the looming figure over her. "Lilypetal, are you alright?" she asked softly, her voice barely audible over the pounding in my ears.

But I couldn't pull my gaze away from Ashfur, from that twisted snarl and the malice simmering in his eyes. I tried to convince myself it wasn't real, that it was all in my head, but my legs were rooted in place, as if my body was convinced otherwise.

Swiftflight also paused after he noticed his own mother stop. He then followed her gaze, his gaze darkening once he noticed me. "What's wrong, Lilypetal?" he asked, his tone sharp and serious, his eyes betraying a flicker of unease. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

And he wasn't wrong—at least, not in my mind.

"Lilypetal, look at me." Thornclaw's voice was gentle but firm as he stepped in front of me, breaking my line of sight. His warm pale blue eyes bore into mine, steady and unwavering. "There's nothing there. Ashfur's gone, remember? Goldenshine is safe. He can't hurt any of us, not anymore." He brushed his tail across my back, grounding me, pulling me back from the edge of that terrifying vision.

I blinked, the dark figure fading from my mind, replaced by Thornclaw's reassuring gaze. I swallowed, heat rising to my face as I looked around, noting the way the others were watching me. Goldenshine's gaze was soft and understanding, while Snowstorm's was wide-eyed, her tail twitching as if she wasn't sure whether to come closer or keep her distance.

Swiftflight, on the other hand, gave me a skeptical look, his fur bristling slightly. "What happened, Lilypetal? Are you okay?"

I nodded slowly, forcing myself to breathe and close my eyes, to push past the lingering remnants of fear clinging to my chest. "I... I'm sorry. I thought I saw something... *someone*," I meowed, giving

everyone a hinting look that everyone immediately understood. "But Thornclaw's right. It wasn't real." My voice came out quieter than I'd intended, and I fought to keep my head held high despite the shame prickling under my fur. *Ugh, I cannot comprehend how crazy I probably just looked...*

Because in reality, now that I had fully come to, I was certain that the "shadow" that I had witnessed looming over Goldenshine was just a large, pesky branch that fell behind her in just the right way.

"It's okay, mother. Really!" Goldenshine reassured me, though her eyes were still full of worry. "Trust me, if Ashfur was actually here and about to attack me, we would have ripped him to shreds already."

"The fact that you have to reassure me of that is *insane*," I then nearly growled.

"Oh, please," Goldenshine went on. "Of course your fears and memories are going to come back – we just were at the place where you *fought* him and stood face to face with his pure evil."

But you're not out here having visions about that pure evil.

I bit back my words, knowing for certain they were just coming out of my own frustrations. Instead, I meowed, "...No, yeah... that completely makes sense." *Really had to bite back the bitter words there.*

"I mean, absolutely," I then heard Swiftflight chime in. "After all that you've dealt with... like I said... it's never all fully going to leave you."

It's never all fully going to leave you. Terrifying.

"And I mean," Goldenshine then went on, "Your fatigue isn't going to help you either."

For StarClan's sake.

"Goldenshine," I then heard Thornclaw nearly bark at his daughter.

"Sorry."

I then forced myself to take a deep breath and open my eyes, and Thornclaw was right there, gazing at me with this soft, steady look, like he could read the storm raging in my head.

"Lilypetal," he murmured, his voice a comforting rumble, rich and warm like freshly caught prey. I could feel his breath on my fur, warm against the chill of my fear. "Maybe we should hold off on hunting." He nudged me gently, brushing his muzzle against my shoulder in that way he did, just enough to steady me without making me feel like he thought I was weak. "You know I want to spend time with you more than anything, but I think you need to just take it easy before the chaos of the Gathering."

Great. I felt my cheeks heat, embarrassed and guilty for worrying him and everyone else. "I'm fine," I mumbled, forcing myself to stand a bit taller. "Really, I am." I tried to give him a convincing nod, but honestly, I must've looked as unsteady as a newborn kit.

But Thornclaw just looked at me, his eyes filled with such genuine concern that my defense crumbled. "Please, Lilypetal," he said softly, flicking his tail across my back. "Let's just go back. You deserve some rest." His gaze softened further, and he added with a mischievous glint, "Besides, what's a little hunting without you by my side?"

"Please stop," I then heard Goldenshine mutter.

His words made my heart melt a bit, easing the knot of fear still tangled in my chest. Leave it to Thornclaw to be both protective and adorably cocky all at once. *StarClan, why does he have to be so good at this?*

I sighed, too worn out to argue with him, no matter how badly I wanted to pretend I could handle it all. "Alright," I said, letting out a long, reluctant breath, my voice coming out in a half-laugh, half-sigh. "You win. But just this once, alright?" *Just. This. Once.*

He chuckled, his pale blue eyes gleaming. "Just this once, deputy," he teased, winking at me. I felt my heart's pace begin to slow,

despite the heaviness still lurking in my chest.

And as we continued to travel back, I could feel Thornclaw's eyes on me, steady and watchful, but I avoided his gaze. He'd meant well, trying to help me see reason, but I was angry at myself, at how easy it had been for Ashfur's shadow to worm its way back into my mind – cause freaking fake *visions* were trying to convince me that that idiot of a tom was still around.

And as we moved through the trees, I tried to shake off the memory, to tell myself it was just this place—the stream, the waterfall, those birch trees.... This was where so much had happened, after all. *Yes, that is exactly it,* I told myself. *I should have been a little bit more cautious before coming here to the WindClan border at all. Of course it would bring up memories. That's it, right?*

And I have to admit, Goldenshine is right. With how exhausted I've been plus all of the insanity that I've dealt with for so many moons... an uneasy vision seems like it's on the easier end of things.

I then gave a shake of my head. *No time to decipher it, either way,* I then told myself. *Time to rest – hypothetical, maybe – and then take on tonight's Gathering.*

Chapter 3

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Goodness, where is Nightwing?" I grumbled, flicking my tail impatiently and trying not to sneeze as I pushed my head deeper into a bush I was peeking into. "She's literally been gone since sunhigh."

Dustystorm let out a snort behind me. "And you *literally* aren't going to find the answer to your question by sticking your head in shrubs." I shot him a look, ears flattening, and he gave a playful shrug. "But either way, she usually gets back around this time."

I fully pulled my head out of the bush, my fur prickling with a mix of irritation and worry. "So, are you saying we should be concerned, or expect her at any moment now?"

Dustystorm didn't have to answer because right then, we both turned toward the camp entrance as Nightwing's sleek black pelt slipped through the brambles. Dustystorm glanced back at me with that adorable, smug expression of his. "The latter."

"Wow, I wonder how you were able to figure out how to answer me," I shot back dryly, flicking my tail over his nose before darting toward Nightwing. My eyes flicked nervously to the cats gathering around, preparing to leave for the... well, *Gathering*. "Hey! Thank *StarClan* you're here, you loosey-goose! We're about to head to the Gathering, and Lilypetal invited you, if you wanted to come."

As I had expected, Nightwing's eyes widened in surprise and she let out an excited gas[. "Your mother, the *deputy*, invited me to the Gathering? I'm so there!"

I couldn't help but let out an amused sniff – I had perfectly predicted my friend's reaction to that news. "Perfect timing! We're heading out soon," I said, letting out a breath I hadn't realized I was

holding.

Nightwing's ears twitched as she glanced around. "Oooo, how soon? I'm starving, and I was hoping I'd be able to grab something quick to eat before we go."

Dustystorm narrowed his eyes at her, concern flickering in their depths. "When was the last time you ate?"

Nightwing's whiskers twitched nervously. "Oh, I grabbed a small mouse before I left today, but that maybe held me over for two heartbeats?"

I exchanged a look with Dustystorm as we trailed after her to the fresh-kill pile. *Strange...* "You couldn't hunt while you were out?"

Nightwing didn't look at us, her focus entirely on the pile. "Nope. What do you think I could scarf down quickly?"

Dustystorm flicked his tail. "Another mouse, maybe?"

Nightwing let out a snort. "No, Dustystorm, *you* practically inhale mice because you hate their guts and can't stand to look at them."

"But they taste so good," Dustystorm protested.

Nightwing purred with amusement, her eyes sparkling. "In honor of Darryl, I will indeed pick a mouse to eat." She reached into the pile, grabbed a mouse, and immediately began to chow down.

I shot Dustystorm a quizzical look. "Darryl?"

"Yes, Darryl," he replied with a solemn nod. "Oh, what a mouse."

I blinked at him, bewildered. "Darryl's... a mouse?"

"A very important one," Dustystorm said with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "He's part of the reason I realized I didn't want to be a housecat anymore."

Nightwing piped up, her words muffled by the mouse she was still chewing. "-and part of the reason you realized that you didn't want

to be with Chloe anymore."

Dustystorm's tail twitched bitterly, and my eyes jokingly narrowed back at him at the mention of the cat he'd loved before me. "Thank you, my sister," he muttered before looking back at me. "Anyway, Darryl also made me realize how annoying mice are. But hey, I'll still eat them."

I stared at him, completely baffled. "You are *so* telling me the whole Darryl saga after the Gathering tonight."

As we shared a look, Nightwing stood up, brushing bits of mouse fur off her chest. "Alright, done!"

Dustystorm's eyes narrowed. "That was like two heartbeats—you had to have hidden it back in the pile or something."

"Nope," Nightwing said, giving her whiskers a satisfied twitch. "Trust me—I was *that* hungry."

I couldn't help but let out a purr of amusement. "I mean, I guess you work up an appetite when you're out taking a walk for so long." I glanced at Dustystorm, wondering if he was just as suspicious as I was about what she'd really been up to. *I mean, cats go out and take walks, especially if they've been super busy or... if they've fought against Dark Forest cats a moon ago, but... I don't know. What does she do out there for so long?*

But before I could press further, Nightwing suddenly flicked her tail and ears, her gaze shifting toward the camp. "Oh! It looks like everyone is starting to head out!"

Sure enough, I turned to see the patrols already lining up. "Right," I sighed, almost disappointed that I couldn't interrogate my friend anymore. "Are you sure you don't need to stay back for this Gathering, Nightwing? You've been out for most of the day."

"Nope!" Nightwing replied, her eyes bright with determination.

I rolled my eyes. "I should've expected that answer."

"Of course you should have," she said with a flick of her tail. "No

way I was going to stay back—not when Lilypetal invited me by name! And besides, the first Gathering after the Dark Forest battle ought to be interesting."

Dustystorm's eyes widened with sudden realization. "Great StarClan, I didn't even think of that. How is everyone going to act around each other?"

"I mean," I said, shrugging, "I would hope after all of us fought to the death together, there'd still be some respect left over!" But even as I said it, doubt gnawed at my mind. "It is weird though. After everything we went through together, we have to go back to our borders—literal and figurative ones."

Dustystorm purred and nudged me playfully. "Wow, you're so poetic!"

I nudged him back, but my mind continued to fill with worry. "It's just... there are Clan cats that showed their true colors that night."

Dustystorm's warm gaze faded, and I slowed my pace, an uncomfortable chill prickling down my spine. "Yeah... and they still get to stand by their Clans and pretend like they didn't just full-on betray their Clanmates."

Nightwing's eyes narrowed. "That's insane to me. Surely they won't be getting off easy."

"I certainly hope not," I murmured, a certain tom and his black pelt briefly flashing through my mind, but I quickly forced it away.

Dustystorm almost seemed to sense my uneasiness, and who I was thinking of. Chloe was brought up a bit ago, so I guess we were even.

And just like the sweet, understanding tom that Dustystorm was, he wrapped his tail around my back in a comforting gesture. "Anyway, we've got a bit of time before we reach the island—how about I give you a preview of the Darryl saga?"

Nightwing let out a groan. "Oh no, not this story again!"

Dustystorm ignored her, staring warmly and excitedly at me. "It's a good one. Trust me."

And that is exactly what my mate did as ThunderClan continued to travel to the island. Dustystorm wasn't able to give me the entirety of the Darryl saga – but all I had gotten so far was that Darryl was a mouse that Dustystorm had chased around his Twoleg home for several days and couldn't catch. As a cat who'd been snatching mice since I was six moons old... I tried not to be concerned. But also knowing that Dustystorm had been a kittypet for most of his life... I tried to reserve judgment. Nevertheless, I was glad that this silly mouse had brought this silly, sweet, and amazing tom to me. *And not to Chloe.*

I then flicked my ears, surprising myself. *What?*

Before we knew it, the island that stood in the middle of the lake came into sight, and a chill ran down my spine to see that the other Clans were already there. I really did wonder what this was going to be like – what the dynamic would be like, *what certain cats would be acting like...*

I actually found myself having to take a deep breath as me, Dustystorm and Nightwing got our turn to walk across the log that led to the island. I could already feel several eyes on us as we made our way across.

Dustystorm was still next to me with his tail around my back, and right behind me, Nightwing was making her way across, her soft pawsteps barely making a sound. I flicked my tail to tap her shoulder, hoping it came off as reassuring, but honestly, my nerves were all over the place. As my paws hit the island, it felt like the ground was still swaying, like I hadn't really left that log behind.

"Are we ready for this?" Dustystorm asked in a low voice. He shot me a warm glance, the kind that usually made my worries melt away, but tonight, it was a little harder to find that spark.

"I guess we're about to find out," I muttered. I kept my eyes on the cats already gathering in the clearing, their pelts blurring together in the half-light. The last time we'd all been in one place... well, it

didn't exactly go great, did it? A battle like that, with so much betrayal and bloodshed—it was hard to believe we could just... what, pretend it never happened? But here we were, trying to act like it was business as usual.

Nightwing caught up to my side, her dark fur almost blending into the shadows. "You good?" she whispered, nudging me with her shoulder.

Are you, miss out-wandering-in-the-forest-all-day? "Yeah, sure," I lied, trying to force a bit of my usual enthusiasm into my voice.

Dustystorm nudged my side gently. "We've got this," he murmured.

We sure do.

I actually found my nerves slowly beginning to ebb away as ThunderClan padded deeper onto the island, and I got to see just how the Clans were interacting with each other. Sure, there was an air of nerves and tension, but at the same time, it seems like these cats were just happy to be together for a reason that wasn't... you know, fighting dead evil demon cats?

We hadn't been here long – a few moments, in fact – but I could see (and hope) that this Gathering was going to be just fine. I think everyone else wanted to go back to normalcy just as much as I did.

After touching his nose to mine, Dustystorm left me and went off into the crowd to speak to some of his friends in WindClan. After all, Dustystorm and I had been chosen to fight with WindClan the night of the battle.

But of course, I would *forever* hold a grudge that he didn't stay by my side. *Rude. Just kidding. Maybe.* And Nightwing began speaking with Minnowtail of RiverClan as soon as we'd gotten onto the island.

Now that I was alone, I took a moment to simply scan my gaze around the island, continuing to feel relieved as I saw all of the Clans mingling with each other and showing genuine enthusiasm at seeing friends from other Clans. *It's almost as if this battle didn't even*

happen.

I then felt my stomach twist as I noticed a flash of black out of the corner of my eye – the same one I'd been trying to forget about earlier. *Well, if only it were that easy.*

I forced myself to shift my gaze just a bit and let it lay on the black pelt of a tom that I had a long history with – a history longer that I'd like to admit to anyone. *I am still baffled that I ever called that tom my mate,* I thought to myself as I simultaneously felt a chill run down my spine and my stomach twist even tighter. *He seemed so kind, brave, charming, smart... even until the end of our time together.*

I then sat down and took a deep breath. *But even then... I could tell that there was an anger in him that even all of those wonderful qualities couldn't hide. I still hadn't completely been able to digest the fact that he'd trained in the Dark Forest, for one. But... the fact that after all that he shared, he tried to hurt me and Dustystorm... or worse... and the fact that he betrayed every cat that had ever been by his side to fight with the Dark Forest...*

I then shut my eyes for a moment, the emotion I'd been pushing down earlier as I'd spoken with Dustystorm and Nightwing finally coming to the forefront. *I can never get over that. I shouldn't. I almost fully regret ever crossing paths with him, and fully regretted running into him in the forest that fateful night and agreeing to meet with him again.*

I then opened my eyes again, shifting my gaze to the dark gray tom that was padding next to Snowstorm, chatting with a couple of cats from ShadowClan. *But I could never fully regret my time with Breezepelt because of that stupid furball over there.*

And what a journey that stupid furball – Swiftflight, my only son and only kit – had been on. He had nearly followed his father's path – having trained in the Dark Forest for *moons* under the guidance of Ashfur (that being one of many horrible things that that gray-speckled tom had done). But Snowstorm, his best friend, and *Snowflight, my sister,* had brought him back down to earth. *But I fully believe that Snowstorm was only part of what made him come to his senses. He knew what was right all along.*

I then let out a sigh and a wave of love run through me as I continued to stare back at my son. *Which is why he was so easily able to then become a son I could not be more proud of. He is nothing like his father, and I couldn't ask for more.*

I then narrowed my eyes as I began to shift my gaze back to Breezepelt, but immediately flicked my ears in surprise to see that he was staring right back at me. I broke my gaze away as quickly as I could, but just enough to where I could still see him out of my peripheral vision. What business did this tom have looking my way?

I then felt a wave of anger beginning to grow inside of me. *Why is he here at* all*? How could WindClan possibly trust him again?*

Out of the corner of my eye, I was shocked to observe that the black tom's eyes weren't dark. In fact, they seemed worried, nervous, searching... *Shocking,* I thought to myself. *You tried to kill me and my mate, and you think you can look at me that way? Why?*

I then forced myself to pad forward, and away. *It's not worth it to know. He is evil, a traitor, and someone that no cat could ever trust.*

I then paused for a moment, looking over my shoulder back towards my son, who was still with Snowstorm and the ShadowClan cats.

And then, as much as I didn't want to, I looked back at Breezepelt for just a heartbeat, giving him a dark, yet confused stare. *If you come anywhere near me or my son, you're crowfood.*

I then broke my gaze from his and padded away once again, now telling myself that he didn't deserve my eyeballs for any more time.

And as I continued to walk through the crowd, I found myself getting closer to the large oak tree that the leaders stood on, the medicine cats and deputies sitting at the bottom of the tree sitting among the roots.

I couldn't help but feel a wave of comfort as my eyes immediately fell on the gray tabby pelt of my best friend in the entire world (somehow). Jayfeather was turned away from me, his head down as

he seemed to be sniffing among some plants that were growing around this tree.

He seemed to scent me and hear me as soon as I approached, and he lifted his head and turned around to face me.

It was almost as if he could see my facial expression and *sense* just how uncomfortable I was feeling right now. "What's wrong with you?" he meowed, in his usually slightly bitter tone.

I let out a sigh and sat next to the medicine cat. "Can you tell your half-brother to stop staring at me and making me feel weird?"

"What in the name of StarClan are you meowing on about?" Jayfeather replied, his eyes narrowing – his words were full of annoyance, but his blind blue eyes seemed to be full of concern. He then seemed to stare off into the crowd as if he could see. "Breezepelt?"

"*No*, your other half-brother – the one that Leafpool had with... Snowfeather named... Sneezepelt," I teased to the tom.

Of course, he let out an annoyed hiss. "Wow, Leafpool gets around," he muttered, bringing me to let out a quiet purr. "Breezepelt's staring at you?"

"Yes! What makes him think he can look in my direction? Or yours? Or anybody's?" I then began to rant. And hoping he wouldn't notice, I glanced back in the WindClan tom's direction. "Is he not ashamed?"

"Last time I was around him, he certainly wasn't," Jayfeather breathed, almost seeming to follow my gaze. "But that was a half-moon ago. Maybe he hit his head and realized he has remorse."

"I don't believe that," I then muttered.

"Didn't expect you to. Because that *doesn't happen*."

"Then what *did* happen?" I pressed to Jayfeather after I gave him a small nudge on the shoulder with my own.

"No idea," Jayfeather answered. "I don't know, and I don't care."

I then felt the medicine cat's gaze shift towards me, and he gave me a flick on the ear with his tail. "And you shouldn't either. You have no reason to give him the time of day."

I let out a sigh. "I know," I breathed. "I just..."

I then trailed off, standing up and feeling my eyes widen as I noticed movement come from Breezepelt's direction. "Oh, no..."

"What? What's going on?" Jayfeather pressed to me, his fur brushing mine as he stood up as well.

I couldn't answer my friend immediately, my head spinning and my heart pounding as I noticed Breezepelt padding across the clearing – heading towards someone.

Heading towards the dark gray pelt of my son. *No.* "That son of a heap of foxdung is walking towards Swiftflight," I then nearly growled.

I then was tempted to shake it away as I felt Jayfeather place the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "Stay here," the tom urged me. "Swiftflight is a full-grown cat who's stood up for himself many times. He can handle himself."

But do I want him to have to handle himself? I don't want Breezepelt talking to him, and I can imagine that Swiftflight feels the same.

I was almost tempted to ignore Jayfeather's words, when suddenly a yowl came from the tree above us – the yowl from Blackstar, ShadowClan's leader, that told us that it was time to begin the Gathering.

And as I had hoped, Breezepelt stopped in his tracks, disappointment and annoyance seeming to fill his gaze, before he turned around and joined his Clan once again. *Good riddance*, I then thought to myself. *I don't think Swiftlfight even noticed that Breezepelt had been heading his way.*

Then, as I took a relieved breath and was about to join the rest of

the crowd, I felt Jayfeather give me a small nudge. "Don't worry about Breezepelt," he told me in a tone that was actually a bit warm and reassuring. "He's the most unpredictable cat that I've ever met, and I'm sure you'd agree. You'll probably just had to continue to deal with his precariousness for a while."

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting out a sigh. "I know. Thanks, Jayfeather."

I then touched my nose to the tom's ear before padding ahead to join the rest of the Clans in the clearing. "I'll see you later." *How can you be the crankiest cat in all of the Clans, but still make me feel better about these trivial things?* I wondered as a wave of gratitude for the ThunderClan medicine cat filled my heart. *Oh, maybe because we spent moons holding each other up after trying to bring back my sister. That could be it.*

Feeling a bit better, but still a bit on edge from what I'd experienced before the Gathering even *began*, I sat down next to Dustystorm and Cherryfall – my former apprentice and my son's mate – as Blackstar began the Gathering, addressing the battle that all of us had just faced and had come out of stronger.

It was truly empowering, and brought me to let out a relieved, content sigh. *We're out of this stronger, that's for sure. And while this truce between us remains here, we have to return to our normal boundaries, which will be weird after all that we went through together.*

I then narrowed my eyes, slightly glancing over my shoulder again to look back at Breezepelt, who was sitting next to Heathertail. *I knew that things couldn't be completely normal post the Dark Forest battle, especially with cats like Breezepelt.* I told myself. *These little weird encounters are just things that I'm going to have to deal with, and that's okay. Within reason, that is.*

Chapter 4

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I was certain that the conversation I was having right now would be one of the most annoying and uncomfortable ones that I would ever have in my life.

And for me, you know, that's saying a lot.

I was mindlessly nodding, my paws shifting back and forth nervously as the black she-cat in front of me – Pinenose of ShadowClan – stared back at me with narrowed, gleaming eyes, her tail lashing back and forth. "I mean, I know we're from different Clans, and that you're so loyal and dedicated and protective towards your own Clan, but..." the she-cat meowed to me, her voice uncomfortably warm. "But maybe you and I could chat again at the next Gathering?"

I then flinched, slightly stepping away as Pinenose brushed her tail along my shoulder. "I've heard what you've done for your Clan – getting out of the Dark Forest and then teaching your Clanmates their ways to make sure they were ready for the big, dangerous battle," she then went on, bringing me to look over my shoulder in search of any way out of this. "You're so heroic."

I then widened my eyes and flicked my ears as the black she-cat then stepped back towards me. "And very handsome too," she then said softly. "I'd love to get to know you more, Swiftflight."

Yeesh.

I shook my head back and forth for a moment, having no idea what to say to the black she-cat. I had to appreciate her boldness – she had approached me almost *immediately* after the Gathering had ended. The Gathering itself had just been full of the typical Clan reports, but also grieving for the cats that we all had lost in the

Great Battle.

So, of course, I was a bit caught off guard when this she-cat I had never spoken to before padded up to me just as the leaders were jumping down from the big oak tree, staring at me like I was a juicy piece of prey. "Well, thank you," I stammered, wanting to practically burst into flames out of the passionate I had for wanting to *run away*. *But I don't want to be rude.*

But I then gave a quick shake of my head. *Get it together, Swiftflight. Want to know what the beautiful thing is? You can do both.*

I forced myself to give Pinenose a polite nod. "But I'm going to have to pass," I tried to meow as evenly as possible. "You said it – we're from different Clans, but also-"

I then cut myself off as I glanced over my shoulder again – my heart suddenly pounding a bit faster with relief, affection, and excitement as my gaze then immediately fell on a very familiar ginger tabby pelt just a few tail-lengths away.

All of my annoyance and discomfort seemed to disappear for a moment, even more so when she almost seemed to sense my gaze and look back at me from where she was speaking with her brother, Molewhisker. Her brown eyes seemed to glow as they rested on mine, and I felt my stomach then seem to flip upside down.

But it only took her a moment to look past me, her brown eyes then wiping over with concern as she noticed Pinenose in front of me paired with my own very stiff demeanor.

Now more than determined to fix this situation, I looked back at Pinenose. "But also..." I then brought myself to continue. "I'm sure you're great, but I'm already with the sweetest, bravest, most intelligent, and beautiful she-cat in the entire world." Then giving the wide-eyed she-cat a nod in farewell, I then began to pad away across the island. "I hope you have a good night, Pinenose."

And as soon as I turned away from the black she-cat, I rolled my eyes and let out the loudest, most obnoxious huff of relief. *Thank StarClan that's over,* I then thought to myself. *Why some cats choose*

to hit on members of other Clans is beyond me. And anyway...

I then fully lifted my head, looking back at heading towards that same sweet, brave, intelligent, and beautiful she-cat that had motivated my words earlier. *I would never, ever think of leaving you, Cherryfall.*

When I padded up to meet her, her gaze was still full of concern, but now had a glint of humor. "I don't know what that she-cat was saying to you, but goodness gracious, did the look she was giving you say enough," my mate purred as she then gave me a comforting lick on the head. "Are you okay, Swiftflight?"

"Sure. But great StarClan..." I then sighed as I wrapped my tail around Cherryfall and pulled her closer to me. "Getting hit on at the Gathering by a ShadowClan cat was not something I would have predicted for tonight."

I then was surprised to hear Cherryfall let out another purr as she nuzzled her muzzle into my shoulder. "Oh, Swiftflight, I am certain that I was only the beginning of she-cats showing interest in you."

"But that's all I need!" I then insisted to the ginger tabby she-cat. I wouldn't care if every other she-cat thought I was disgusting as long as you still loved me, for StarClan's sake.

"I know," Cherryfall then meowed sweetly, bringing me to let out a low purr as she then gave me a lick on the neck. "But I'm just saying, you're probably going to have to get used to it."

"Fantastic," I then muttered before proceeding to let out another sigh. "I guess I don't care if it happens again – I'll just brag about you some more."

I then flicked my ears in alarm, realizing that I wasn't necessarily the only "victim" in this situation. "But what about you? Are *you* okay? I hope I didn't scare you."

Cherryfall then raised her eyebrows back at me. "Do I have a reason to be scared?"

"No!" I immediately replied to Cherryfall, my gray-blue eyes

probably now looking like they were about to fall out of my head.

But to my surprise, and to my relief, Cherryfall then let out one of her precious giggles that always made my heart flip upside down. "I'm kidding. I trust you, Swiftflight. You handled that very well from what I could see, and..."

I then felt another purr rising in my throat as the ginger tabby she-cat then seemed to look down shyly as she began to shift her paws back and forth. "It's nice to hear that you think those things about me. You were really sweet."

The purr then completely rose in my throat, and was overwhelmed with affection at seeing Cherryfall's adorable, shy demeanor. *The fact that she would think that I see her as any less... I can't believe she doesn't have any idea of how amazing she is. How indescribably thankful I am to be with her.*

I then blinked a couple of times to myself. *Wow... and I can't believe how sappy I sound...* I couldn't help but think for a moment.

I then gave a shake of my head, getting rid of all of those pre-existing, vulnerability-hating thoughts that tried to creep up – like they used to. *Who cares? I can think and say all of the sappy things that I want to – and...* no one *is going to keep me from feeling how I feel.*

I then let out a sigh. *Not when it could have kept all of this... Cherryfall... from happening.* "It was the truth, Cherryfall," I then meowed softly to my mate as lifted up her chin with my tail and gave her a lick on the nose. "I love you, and I want to be with *you* and only you."

As Cherryfall then let out a purr and dug her head into my shoulder, I half-nervously glanced towards a certain tortoiseshell pelt that was just about to step onto the log that led off of the island. The she-cat's blue eyes were narrowed and full of caution, but simultaneously filled with ease and certainty.

I gave her a nod in greeting as Cherryfall and I then both stood up and began to make our own way towards the departing log. "You

could tell that to your mother too – you know, if it ever comes up."

Cherryfall then let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Oh, come on, Swiftflight, you don't need to prove anything to Poppyfrost anymore."

"Cherryfall, I will be proving things to her for the rest of my life," I said to my mate with wide eyes. "You know what? Don't bother – I'll tell her if it comes up. I'm not scared of her."

I then glanced back at Poppyfrost for a moment, who was now simply looking ahead as she followed the rest of ThunderClan off of the island. "For the most part."

Cherryfall and I then managed to share a purr of amusement as we then trotted up to catch up with the rest of our Clan. I paused for a moment and took a step back as we got to the log, helping Cherryfall get onto it first, before jumping onto it myself.

And as the two of us walked across the log together with the rest of ThunderClan, I couldn't help but simply stare off at Cherryfall for a few moments, just the sight of her still making my heart pound in my own ears. *Sure, if all that time ago it had been easy for me to figure out and then share my feelings for her, and to get past all of the trouble that Poppyfrost gave us...*

I then rolled my eyes to myself. *Trouble that was justified, I suppose...but if all of that had been easy, I would appreciate Cherryfall and still love her with everything I have, but... after all we've been through, and because it was hard – through all of my stupidity, and Ashfur and the Dark Forest, and all of the stupidity that was brought onto me by Ashfur and the Dark Forest - I don't think that I could be more appreciative of her if I tried.*

At that thought, I brought myself to quicken my pace and fully catch up to Cherryfall. I then let out another purr and pressed my muzzle against hers for a moment. "I love you," I then whispered to her.

Cherryfall immediately looked back at me, her big, beautiful brown eyes glowing in the moonlight. "I love you too, Swiftflight," she then

purred to me as she brushed her tail against my cheek. "I-"

"Swiftflight!"

I flicked my ears in surprise, and we both turned our heads to look in the direction of the voice. And I looked over my shoulder to immediately recognize the white pelt of my best friend – my best friend that I had gone through thick and thin with; that I had thought once would never trust me again; and the one I had nearly lost, but I couldn't be more grateful that I hadn't - Snowstorm, heading our way. "There you are!"

The she-cat then paused for a moment, giving a shy look to both me and Cherryfall. "Sorry to interrupt."

Cherryfall looked back at Snowstorm, her eyes glowing with kindness as she gave her a nod. "Not a problem! I was getting tired of Swiftflight anyway."

I then furrowed my eyes back at the ginger she-cat as she gave me a lick on the cheek. "Kidding," she then purred to me. "I'll see you at our nest later tonight."

"Sounds like a plan," I meowed warmly to Cherryfall, watching her for a moment and following her pelt as she padded farther down the log, stopping to talk with Emberheart.

I then forced myself to break my gaze from her, giving a nod in greeting to Snowstorm. But almost immediately after that, I let out a grunt and narrowed my eyes when I saw the smug look that Snowstorm was giving me. "Stop," I muttered to her.

Snowstorm let out a sniff. "Stop what? I'm not doing anything!"

"Your eyebrows going up and down says otherwise," I murmured to her, giving her a nudge with my tail as she let out a purr of amusement.

"You love her," Snowstorm then teased me, nuzzling my head with her tail. "You love her a *lot*."

I let out a small, annoyed hiss and pushed my best friend's tail away

with one of my paws. "Sure I do, *and?*" I then barked back at Snowstorm. "Can I do that without you staring at me like that?"

"Probably not," Snowstorm purred. "Anyway, that's not the only reason I came over here."

"Thank StarClan," I had to mutter. "What's up?"

I then watched as Snowstorm glanced over her shoulder. "Goldenshine actually sent me to get you – I think she's a little bit behind us."

"She did?" At Snowstorm's words, my eyes narrowed, and my heart began to beat a bit faster. "Is everything alright?"

"I think so, but... if I'm being honest, she did look a bit nervous," Snowstorm admitted to me, her pale blue eyes now full of worry.

"Foxdung," I muttered to myself before giving Snowstorm a nod in farewell and flicking her ear with my tail. "Thanks, Snowstorm. I'll go find her."

"Sounds good," Snowstorm then meowed as she flicked my ear right back. "Catch me up on it later?"

"Absolutely," I replied to Snowstorm, then turning around to walk in the opposite direction. "See you later."

"Seeya!"

I then tried my best to navigate through the crowd, having to throw out a couple of apologies here or there at the fact that was literally coming *straight at* other cats.

In a way, it was almost like walking through a fog as thoughts of what Goldenshine could want began to fill my head. *Considering it was likely something that had come up during the Gathering, and something that couldn't wait until we got back to camp... shoot. What could this be?*

I then shook my head, telling myself that I would find out very shortly as I continued to look for the golden brown tabby pelt of my

mother. Luckily, it only took a few moments, and I found her near the back walking just beside Mousewhisker. She was speaking with him, but something in her dark gray eyes looked distant, as if something was on her mind.

I then couldn't help but let out a snort. *Unfortunately, this was a look I used to see a lot,* I thought to myself. *And it was my fault. So I know it very well.*

I then gave another quick shake of my head, padding up to meet my mother. Her eyes immediately seemed to fill up with relief when she noticed me. "It's about time!" she breathed, giving a nod to Mousewhisker and then padding up to me.

"What do you mean?" I replied to her as I let out a snort. "Blame Snowstorm for making you wait."

"Whatever," Goldenshine purred as she touched her nose to my cheek. "I guess I'm glad you made it either way."

"Me too," I replied to my mother. But as she pulled away, I stared back at her with concern. "So, what's going on? You look worried."

Goldenshine then let out a snort, to my surprise. "*You* exist. Of course I look worried." After I rolled my eyes, she let out a small purr and gave me an affectionate nudge. "But I guess sometimes I'm worried for other reasons. Like tonight."

"Oh, yeah?" I pressed my mother as my eyebrows raised. "What's going on?"

She let out a long sigh, her golden brown tabby pelt catching the moonlight as we walked through the forest. "Where to even start?" she muttered, closing her eyes briefly. "Ugh, I hate that this is even a problem that we're having."

I raised an eyebrow, feeling the fur on my shoulders bristle slightly. "A problem? That *we're* having?"

"Well, okay, I hope not," she corrected quickly, shaking her head. "I hope that it won't be any sort of problem at all, but I still wanted to give you a heads-up as soon as possible."

I sighed, letting my head fall back as I closed my eyes. "Oh, foxdung," I groaned. "What could this be?"

"Again, hopefully, nothing," she replied, though her gaze drifted over her shoulder toward the island where the other Clans were beginning to depart. "Maybe."

I followed her gaze for a moment, confused and growing impatient. Finally, I turned back to her. "Okay, *please* tell me what is going on before I paw you on the ear for being so cryptic."

Goldenshine let out another sigh, shaking her head. "Okay, sorry. Anyway." She took a deep breath, her eyes closing as if to collect her thoughts. When she looked at me again, her dark gray eyes were filled with concern. "Did you happen to notice Breezepelt lingering around tonight?"

I blinked, my ears twitching. "Breezepelt?" *That's a name I haven't heard in a while.*

I thought about it for a moment before replying. "Well, yeah, I saw him...?"

Her gaze didn't waver, her concern palpable. "Did he try to talk to you at all?"

"Why in the name of StarClan would he try to talk to *me*?" I asked sharply, though my mind drifted to the one time I *had* tried to talk to Breezepelt during the Dark Forest battle – the first time he'd heard me speak since I'd first become an apprentice. I'd begged him to consider changing his path, to abandon the Dark Forest's ways, because there was *still time* to do that. *Not to brag on myself, but I had done that.*

He hadn't given me a single word in reply. I doubted he even listened. But... my chest tightened as a thought struck me. My eyes widened, and I turned back to Goldenshine. "What, did he try to talk to you tonight?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, he didn't. Thank StarClan. But gosh, was he looking at me a lot." She gave me a pointed nod. "And you too. It

even looked like he wanted to come up and talk to you at one point."

I blinked, hardly able to process what she was saying. The idea was so strange it made my fur prickle. I broke away from her gaze, staring down at the grassy ground as we padded along in the ThunderClan forest. "That's... so weird," I muttered finally. "Did it really seem like that's what he was doing? And... *why?* Why *now?*"

Goldenshine snorted softly. "Don't count on me to explain your father's thought process."

"Fair enough," I said with a sniff and a shrug. I thought for another moment, my mind still spiraling. "Well then... *how* was he looking at us? Was that at least somewhat clear?"

"Weirdly, it was," she admitted, letting out a humorless purr of amusement. "Or, maybe I was just imagining it—but..." Her voice trailed off as she took a deep breath. Her expression shifted, a flicker of something softer crossing her face. "I maybe saw some remorse there?"

Her words hit me like a falling tree. My eyes widened, and my stomach twisted in shock. *Remorse? Breezepelt? No way.* I had thought I'd seen that same thing after I'd talked to him during the battle, but just like my mother, I thought there was no way that could be true, but...

What if... what if my words to him during the Dark Forest battle actually did matter to him?

I shook my head quickly, pulling myself out of my swirling thoughts. "Strange," I murmured, my voice guarded. "What do you think we should do about it?"

Goldenshine's reply was immediate, firm. "Oh, absolutely nothing, Swiftflight. I don't care if there was remorse in his eyes. After everything that he's done—to me, to you, to Dustystorm... to all of his Clanmates..." Her voice hardened, her fur bristling. "I mean, he fought with the *Dark Forest*, for StarClan's sake!"

I let out a shaky sigh, my chest tightening as I muttered, "He sure did."

"A little remorse is not nearly enough for me, if that's even what that was," she continued, her tone unyielding. "And I don't think it should be for you, either." She paused as we reached the ThunderClan camp entrance, her steps slowing. "After you," she offered, stepping aside.

I nodded to her, padding through the entrance. "Thanks," I said before returning to the conversation. "And... don't worry. I don't." I hesitated, my mind still churning. "It's just... interesting."

Goldenshine followed me into the stone hollow, her golden brown pelt glowing faintly in the moonlight. "I agree," she said softly. "*Very* interesting. And I wanted to tell you about it as soon as possible because... I don't trust him, Swiftflight."

I let out a snort, shrugging lightly. "Oh, I don't trust him any more than you do."

She nodded, her eyes softening. "Good. Because..." She closed her eyes for a moment, a sigh escaping her. "Listen, you are a full-grown cat. You can make your own choices and choose to talk to whoever you like, but... I am tempted to steer you away from this one. I know it's hard—he is your father, after all."

I nodded slowly, looking off as I tried to digest her words. "Yeah... but, I get it. I agree." I shook my head quickly, forcing myself to straighten out. I was shocked that I found I had to push down a bit of disappointment. "That would bring nothing but trouble. And hey, I've... I mean, I've gone my whole life without him anyway."

Her gray eyes flickered with concern for just a moment, but relief soon replaced it. She touched her muzzle to my ear. "That is true. Anyway," Running her tail gently along my back, she added, "It's late, and you're probably tired. Let's get some rest."

I nodded sharply. "Let's get some rest."

As we began to walk toward the warriors' den, I glanced back at her

with a playful glint in my eye. "I'll dream about shrews."

Goldenshine gasped dramatically, her eyes wide with mock indignation. "I'll dream about thrushes, and it's going to be *great.*"

I let out a purr, flicking my tail as I let her pad into the den first. "Whatever. Good luck with that."

I then snorted, flashing my mother one last affectionate look before letting her head over to her nest with Dustystorm, and letting myself head over to mine and Cherryfall's nest. I actually found I was having to step over several cats and be as quiet as possible. So many ThunderClan cats were already out for the day, and we had *just* gotten back from the Gathering. I guess the first Gathering after a big battle will take a lot out of cats.

Of course, cats like Lilypetal, however, were still nowhere to be found. *I really hope she gets some rest tonight. She clearly needs it...*

I then tried to push away those uneasy thoughts as I finally arrived at my nest. I couldn't help but let out a small purr when I saw that she was already curled up in our nest. She was clearly already fast asleep – the buttercups I'd put in our nest right in front of her nose, and her tail right over her eyes to shield them from any moonlight.

I simply stared at her for a moment, having to suppress a louder purr, before touching my muzzle to her head, taking in her sweet scent, and curling up in our nest and cuddling up beside her. *I love you, beautiful. Sleep well.*

And as I curled into my nest next to my mate, the familiar scents of the ThunderClan warriors' den surrounding me, my mind refused to settle. Thoughts of Breezepelt kept resurfacing, and my talk with Goldenshine earlier haunting me like a shadow.

Remorse. Goldenshine had said it, and she wasn't one to throw around baseless ideas. *Most of the time.* She saw something there—or at least thought she did.

But it seemed impossible. He had stood on the Dark Forest's side, unyielding and silent, even when I'd begged him to reconsider. Not

a single word. No explanation. No acknowledgment. Just cold indifference.

And now, a single fleeting glance was enough to stir all this? I kneaded my nest with my claws, frustration prickling under my pelt. It didn't make sense. *One look shouldn't matter—not after everything he's done.*

But... what if? What if my words during the battle had reached him? What if some part of him had been listening, even when he gave no sign of it? What if, somehow, he'd changed... or wanted to?

The thought made my stomach twist, and not in a way I liked. Part of me wanted to dismiss it entirely, to scoff at the idea and move on. After all, cats didn't just change overnight. *Well... most of the time.* I then thought to myself. *Go, me – who literally made a change overnight...*

I shook my head, huffing out a soft breath that stirred the moss at my paws. I wasn't going to figure this out tonight, and it wasn't worth losing sleep over. Breezepelt wasn't here, and even if he had been, I doubted he'd find the courage to explain himself—not after all this time.

No. There were no answers in this tonight, and worrying about it would only exhaust me. I closed my eyes, forcing my thoughts to quiet.

Goldenshine was right. I didn't need Breezepelt. I never had. This wouldn't change anything.

I then felt myself slowly drifting off into sleep – the stress of my talk with Goldenshine and all of this weird speculation beginning to disappear and leave me in peace.

Well, only for a moment.

As the world around me began to dissolve, I found my heart immediately sinking.

I recognized the cold that seeped into my fur, the way the shadows clung to my paws as if they had weight. My ears flattened as dread

coiled tight in my stomach. *Not again.*

The forest stretched out before me, dark and silent, and I instinctively knew where I was: the Dark Forest. It was like ThunderClan territory, except darker, more ominous, and Silverpelt above was nowhere to be found.

I'd been here before, too many times to count. I hated to admit that in some ways, it was still more familiar than some parts of the *real* ThunderClan territory.

Unfortunately, it had been in my dreams, in my memories, in the parts of my mind I couldn't escape. My claws scraped against the ground as I tried to steady myself, but it didn't help. The weight of this place pressed down on me, suffocating and relentless.

The shadows shifted, moving like living things, pooling and slithering across the forest floor. Whispers started up, faint at first but growing louder with each heartbeat. I couldn't make out the words, but the tone was enough—malicious, taunting, full of something sharp and cold.

I forced myself to move, paws dragging as though I were wading through mud. Every step sent a shiver through me, but I couldn't stop. If I stopped, they'd catch me.

The trees thinned into a clearing, and the whispers grew louder, wrapping around me like thorn tendrils. Shapes began to emerge from the shadows, flickering at the edges of my vision. They were cats—or at least they had been, once. Now, they were nothing but hollow, looming forms with eyes that glowed like little flames.

I froze, my breath catching in my throat as I realized they were staring at me. Silent, unmoving, but watching.

And then I saw them.

The blue eyes.

My chest clenched as the shadows split, and those eyes burned through the darkness, locking onto mine. Ice shot through my veins, my paws rooted to the spot. They seemed so familiar—too cold, too

cruel, too *wrong.*

Ashfur.

I couldn't see his face, but those eyes were enough. They pierced through me like claws, dragging me back into the moons of torment he'd inflicted. My legs trembled, and I tried to look away, but I couldn't. His gaze pinned me like prey, and the whispers grew into what felt like a deafening roar.

"Swiftflight."

The voice wasn't loud, but it didn't need to be. It slithered into my ears, twisting my stomach into knots. It was soft, mocking, as though he found my fear amusing.

I stumbled back, but the shadows closed in, swallowing the clearing. The blue eyes didn't move—they didn't need to. They were everywhere, practically surrounding me.

"*Join us.*"

I jolted awake with a sharp gasp, my heart pounding in my ears. The familiar warriors den greeted me, the soft snores of my Clanmates grounding me into the present. I dragged in a shaky breath, my fur damp with sweat and sticking to my sides.

It took a moment to realize my claws were unsheathed, digging into the moss beneath me. I forced them back, my paws trembling as I sat up. Thankfully, Cherryfall was still fast asleep beside me, her flank rising and falling slowly.

I found myself putting one of my paws on hers, I guess to seek comfort. The image of those blue eyes in my dream was already burning behind my eyelids, and I knew better than to try closing them again.

This wasn't the first time I'd woken like this. I hated how familiar the feeling was—the racing heart, the cold sweat, the lingering dread. No matter how much time passed, these dreams always came back, clawing at the edges of my mind when I least expected it.

I swallowed hard, forcing air into my lungs. My claws were still unsheathed, tangled in the moss. It took a concentrated effort to retract them, my paws trembling as I rubbed them against the bedding.

I then forced myself to lie back down, and I pressed my muzzle into the moss, trying to slow my breathing.

My tail flicked sharply, brushing against the edges of my nest. I doubted I'd be able to sleep again tonight. Not after that. My limbs felt heavy, and my mind buzzed with restless energy. *Hm... what shall I think about in my lack of sleep? This horrible nightmare? Maybe we can analyze Breezepelt's "remorse" a bit more?*

The shadows of the den offered no answers, no comfort. I let out a slow sigh, resigned to the fact that sleep wasn't coming back tonight. I guess I had no choice but to stay here, lying in the dark with my thoughts, until the dawn finally broke and put them to rest —for a little while, at least.

Now I was wishing that I had dreamed about thrushes instead.

Chapter 5

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I doubted I'd be able to sleep again tonight. Not after that.

Goodness, and I thought that my nightmares were vivid before *the Dark Forest battle.*

After I'd managed to catch my breath and readjust myself in my nest, the early morning birds and crickets chirping in the distance, I found myself having to hold back a growl as I sunk unsheathed claws into the moss beneath me.

After all of this time... after all that I've done to make it all go away and to make me and my family feel safe... why does he never go away? I thought to myself in frustration, a chill running down my spine as those blue, menacing eyes flashed in my head once again, and a certain gray-speckled pelt almost *still* seemed to be circling me ominously.

I then let out a huff, lying my head down on the moss and putting my paws over my ears, almost as if to block out anything external that would make me freak out all over again. *Because apparently now* shadows *will make me think that Ashfur is still here and hanging around.*

I then let out a quiet snort. *Geez, how insane is that?* I then thought. *Lilypetal, he's gone. He's literally gone. You saw him disappear into thin air.*

I then found myself rolling onto my back. *How many times have I told myself this over the last moon? Who's to say?*

I then forced myself to take a deep breath, staring up at one of the small slits that was in the roof of the warriors den. I could just barely see the navy, purple and pink sky, along with the full moon,

which was now just barely visible as it began to disappear into the light of day.

I then let out a sniff as I locked my gaze onto that faint full moon. *I can't believe it, but the Gathering last night was a distraction from all of this*, I realized to myself.

I hadn't really thought about it until now, but it was true. I had been terrified still, especially since it was going to be the first Gathering after the Dark Forest battle, *and* my first Gathering where I represented ThunderClan as their deputy. With all the other wonderful contenders Bramblestar could have selected, along with the fact that I had once been a *kittypet*, I worried the response wouldn't be good at *all*.

Yeah, yeah, Firestar was a kittypet too, but I suppose I had worried that the other Clans would lose it to find out that the kittypets in power were continuing...

I luckily quickly found I had nothing to worry about, to my surprise. Sure, I caught some eyerolls, but the nods in approval highly overpowered that silliness. I also had received several kind words after the Gathering, which absolutely warmed my heart.

But during the Gathering, *goodness*, was my heart pounding. Before and *after* Bramblestar had made the announcement of my position. *Before*, of course, I was worried what the response would be, and *after*¸ I was terrified that every eye was on me – practically *stuck* to my own fur.

I mean, did I look like a deputy? Was I sitting up straight? Did I look like I knew what I was doing?

Of course, in that moment, I could only answer myself – all pretty inconclusive.

So, the mix of all of that uncertainty, experiencing the first Gathering after the Great Battle, as well as the shocking praise I'd received that night, luckily all thoughts of Ashfur, the nightmares I was having, as well as the *embarrassing* episode I'd had in front of my family earlier that day... weren't at the forefront of my mind for

a bit.

But here they were, rearing their ugly heads all over again. *Great...*

And like I'd said, there was *no way* I was getting back to sleep tonight. *Sure, I'd be up soon anyway to set up the dawn patrol, but this little bit just adds to all the losses in sleep I've had recently...*

"Lilypetal?"

I physically jolted, completely startled by the voice that I heard. But after a moment and a quick shake of my head, I brought myself back down as I realized that it was only Thornclaw speaking to me, his pale blue eyes wide with concern as they almost seemed to glow in the darkness. "Oh, shoot, I'm sorry!" he whispered to me frantically as he sat up in our nest. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I sighed, flashing my mate a reassuring look and brushing my tail against his cheek. "Oh, don't worry – right now, you'd probably still scare me even if you gave me a warning beforehand," I purred quietly.

I then flicked my eyes, now being the one looking concerned and frantic. "Oh no, did I wake you?"

Thornclaw met me with warm eyes, but despite that, I felt such heavy disappointment when he hesitated for a moment and gave the smallest nod. "It's okay, don't worry about it!" he meowed, luckily sounding genuine as he let out a small purr and touched his muzzle to my ear. "I think you woke me up with your squirming."

I then flicked my ears as Thornclaw's gaze seemed to wipe over with concern and worry once again. "And I'm glad that you did. I'm glad that I can be awake to make sure that you're okay."

I then let out a small snort. "You mean you wouldn't rather be snoring away as I try to process my insanity?"

Thornclaw let out a sigh and rolled his eyes. "Great StarClan, Lilypetal, you're not insa-" He then cut himself off, now giving me a completely taken aback look. "Wait, I snore?"

I found myself having to hold back a purr as I stared back at Thornclaw's adorable, humiliated face. "If some cat were to define what the perfect, most tolerable and not-annoying snore would sound like, it would be exactly what yours is, Thornclaw."

"But you're saying I snore?"

"...Maybe."

"Aw, well, darn..." Thornclaw muttered before giving himself a shake of his head. "Geez, what am I talking about? Lilypetal, it is completely okay that you woke me up, and my *gosh*, you're not insane."

"I don't think that someone who has all of these nightmares and is scared of shadows is completely *sane*," I meowed to Thornclaw as I gave a shrug. I then felt a wave of guilt, pulling my gaze away from Thornclaw's for a moment as I shut my eyes. "And it's all affecting you too. You have to see me freak out at those shadows and be right next to me when I have all of these nightmares."

I then felt my heart skip a beat when Thornclaw didn't immediately reply. In fact, he only let out a sigh. *Oh, no...* I thought to myself. *I've sold the argument that I'm insane* too *well. He's going to leave this den right now and wonder what the heck he's doing.*

My heart was pounding in my ears by the time he spoke again. "Lilypetal," he sighed, "I hope you know that I don't feel like I *have* to do anything with you."

I then let out an exasperated sigh. "I know, but-"

"I *get* to," Thornclaw then told me, his gaze steady and sure as I then felt him twin his tail with my own. "I *get* to be with you through all of this, and *get* to be right next you when you have these nightmares."

I then had to hold back an overwhelmed, affectionate purr as my mate then gently lowered my head with his paw and then gave me a lick on the head. "I hope it's been somewhat clear up until now, but I love you more than words could ever say, and getting to be

the one by your side through your struggles means everything to me."

I let out a shaky sigh, hardly being able to take such sweet words. Sure, they weren't rare coming from Thornclaw, but nevertheless, they always made me feel so light, so loved, and so safe no matter how many times I heard them. "Oh, Thornclaw... I love you more than words or anything could ever say – hopefully that's been pretty clear too – and it also means the world to me that you're by my side during all of this. I just... I worry that you-"

"Nope, don't worry about what I think of you at all," Thornclaw whispered in reply, completely reading my mind. "My perception of you is *solid*."

"...Thanks?" I meowed, tilting my head as I held back another purr.

Thornclaw shook his head quickly, as if to recollect himself. "Sorry, that did sound weird. I mean..." He then tightened his grip on my tail. "The incredibly kind, insanely brave, intelligent, thoughtful, and beautiful Lilypetal is never something that wavers in my eyes, no matter what you or I go through."

I couldn't even speak for a few moments, overwhelmed by Thornclaw's words, and all I could do was stare, my hazel eyes surely gleaming, as my mate went on. "You have been through *so* much. Sure, all of us have, but no cat has endured the exact thing you have endured," he meowed warmly to me, his gaze certain and reassuring. "Having nightmares... thinking that you see *things* out in the forest... that's normal after what you've endured. Lilypetal, none of that makes you any less sane."

I then let out a sigh and closed my eyes, finally managing to speak. "I know." I then forced myself to take a deep breath. "I know."

I then found my gaze falling to the ground, my head shaking slowly as I continued to process all of the incredibly sweet words that Thornclaw had just shared with me – *all* at a whisper, since every cat around us was still asleep, their flanks slowly rising and falling. "Gosh, I... I feel like I need to give *you* some really kind words and tell you how amazing you are for a while after all of that..."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Thornclaw murmured, and I narrowed my eyes as I met my mate's smug look. "I know how much you love me."

"Goodness gracious," I sighed, giving the golden brown tabby tom a nudge. "I wish I could deny it just to get that stupid look off your face, but I can't."

"Figured," Thornclaw then meowed, causing me to roll my eyes. He then let out a purr and gave me another quick lick on the head. "But in all seriousness, just because I tell you how much you mean to me doesn't mean I expect you to proclaim it to me in return, especially after that nightmare."

"Well, I'd like to in some capacity," I then whispered sheepishly to my mate, digging my muzzle into his neck and taking a moment to breath in his familiar, comforting scent. "You mean more to me than I could ever say, Thornclaw. Thank you for always knowing when I need you, even when I don't say it." I then shook my head in amazement. "After all these seasons, the way you check on me and remind me I'm not alone still means everything." *Oh, how I needed it.*

"Always here to do it," he then purred softly as he brushed his tail along my back.

The two of us then simply lied there in silence for several heartbeats. At this point, I don't think either of us were going to fall back asleep, but nevertheless, it was so, so nice to just *be there* with Thornclaw – my flank pressed into his and my muzzle pressed into his neck, his scent flooding into my nose, and his calming breathing and the sound of his heartbeat being the only thing I could hear.

And I hated more than *anything* to break this moment. But, as the chirping birds outside became even louder, the morning cricket noises slowly began to fade away, and as the navy in the sky began to disappear, I knew that I had to get up. "I hope you know that everything you said this morning is going to be my way of coping with the stresses of today," I breathed as I forced myself to pull away from Thornclaw. "Because it's all about to begin."

Thornclaw rolled his eyes once again, clearly annoyed by my doubt.

"You're going to blow everyone away as you always do. Don't worry."

I let out a huff, giving a slow shake of my head as worry seemed to make my heart feel hollow. "I'm sure going to try.*"-to not worry, that is. Blow everyone away? Ambitious.*

After standing up in my nest and letting myself take a stretch, I looked hopefully back at Thornclaw. "By the way, are we good to have our afternoon hunt today? This morning after your dawn patrol goes out, I was probably going to train with Lilypaw all morning, but after I send out a hunting patrol, I should be good to go?"

"Only if you think you have the time," Thornclaw looked back at me, concerned for a moment.

"Even if I didn't, I would *make* time," I reassured Thornclaw, my eyes wide. "I somehow need to maintain the sanity that you claim I still have!"

After the two of us shared a quiet purr, I gave my mate a nod. "So yes, absolutely. Let's do it."

"Good," Thornclaw purred as he also stood up. "Because I think I have an idea of something else we could do during that time."

"Oh?" I pressed to the golden brown tabby tom as I tilted my head.

"We can hunt for a bit, sure, but I wondered if you maybe wanted to take a visit over to the Twolegplace to visit Oreo?" Thornclaw asked, his pale blue gaze looking genuinely eager. "I know you haven't seen him in a few quarter moons, and maybe getting to see your brother would help you get your mind off of things?"

This was one of several examples of instances in our relationship where Thornclaw seemed to know what I needed before I did.

Because Great *StarClan*, did going to see Oreo sound more wonderful than anything in the world.

Oreo – truly the kindest tom that any cat could know, who was also

so funny, selfless, and open-minded – my half-brother, but that always felt wrong to say. He was my *brother*.

While I had long forgiven Mistpelt for not telling me about him until I was about to have my *second* litter of kits, still, the fact that I had not known about him for so long made my heart sink every time I thought about it. He had come from a different father than Scourge – a tom named Wendell – but we still shared blood, and to share blood with a cat like him was more than an honor.

And of course, it was a better late than never situation.

And I mean, since we met, it was like we'd already known each other for our entire lives, and up until today, we've stayed connected, to say the least. *I mean, I came to him for advice when I was deep in my issues with Ashfur, and he helped that ThunderClan rescue patrol get me out of that horrid house, among many other things.*

He always lifted my spirits and was there for me, sure, but also, I missed him so much, and Thornclaw was right – it had been a bit since we've been able to catch up.

So, if it wasn't clear already, getting to visit Oreo was definitely something that I needed right now. "Oh, heck yes, let's do it!" I meowed enthusiastically to Thornclaw, touching my nose to his to thank him for the proposition.

I then backed away, also proceeding to lead my mate out of the warriors den. "But are you sure you can stand it?" I asked Thornclaw, my eyes now narrowed with one of my eyebrows cocked. "Being in the Twolegplace again? The last time we were there was when you got me out of that Twoleg den."

Thornclaw let out a hoarse sigh and closed his eyes for a moment after we'd fully left the warriors den. "Oh, don't remind me, or I'll actually consider not going." After I let out a purr, he opened his pale blue eyes to reveal reassurance, and only the slightest bit of reluctance. "I'm always willing to power through for you. And hey, what if I want to see Oreo too?"

"Aw, that's sweet," I purred to Thornclaw, giving him a light nudge.

"He'll be so happy to see you."

I then flicked my ears, surprised for a moment as Thornclaw slowed down his pace and let out a gasp. "Oh my goodness, what?"

Thornclaw fully came to a stop, his eyes wide with excitement as he looked back at me. "Lilypetal, I just realized..." my mate began. "You've seen Oreo recently, but it's been a bit since you've been to his Twoleg nest, right?"

"Right!" I immediately answered Thornclaw, prompting him to go on.

"What if we finally get to meet the she-cat that you told me that he might have met?" the golden brown tabby tom meowed, causing my eyes to immediately widen. "Mistpelt alluded to something, right? And when you asked Oreo about it he didn't completely deny it?"

I then felt my mouth drop open as Thornclaw began to nod his mischievously. "Maybe we'll finally get to find out what the deal is."

This argument would have sold me if there was any doubt before.

And I had to suppress a squeal as I gave Thornclaw several eager nods. "Oh, we are so there!" I purred as my mate let out a *mrrow* of laughter. I then nodded to the camp entrance, where Whitewing, Cloudtail, and Molewhisker were waiting. "Hurry up and get on that dawn patrol so that I can start training Lilypaw! We're heading out as soon as we can!"

Thornclaw let out another purr before pressing his muzzle to mine. "Sure thing, O great deputy."

"Stop it," I muttered, only pretending to be annoyed as Thornclaw called me by that silly name he'd given to me since I earned the... "O great deputy" position. "I love you."

"Oh, I love you too. Always and no matter what," Thornclaw meowed gently to me. And as he pulled his muzzle away, he gave me one last look full of love and reassurance before padding up to the dawn patrol I had put together just after the Gathering the night before. "See you later."

See you later.

And as the four cats disappeared through the gorse tunnel, I found myself turning around, sitting down as I came to face the apprentices den. *Until I see Oreo later... let's see if I can live up to that "O great deputy" in any capacity.*

~>~>~>~>~>~

Did I fulfill the position of "O great deputy" during my morning? Again, inconclusive.

First things first: I took Lilypaw out for training. Truthfully, Lilypaw was someone who could probably lighten up my worst days with her enthusiasm. And again, truthfully, I had so much fun training her, as I always did. After our session on sneaking up on cats properly, I began to teach her what to do after you actually manage to startle your opponent and take advantage of that. Her enthusiasm for it made my morning, and as always, she was a quick learner. But I had to admit, matching her energy was a bit more difficult today with how exhausted I was. But I could never have her thinking that I was getting old, right? Hopefully she didn't notice.

When we got back to camp, I checked in with the dawn patrol that had returned just a bit before Lilypaw and I did. They didn't report anything unusual, so at least there's one less thing to worry about... *for now.* Then came the hunting patrol—picking cats and sending them out while silently hoping I didn't pair someone with their worst enemy or accidentally miss someone who's starving.

No pressure, right? Nah.

By the time I finally had a moment to breathe, I was exhausted—mentally, mostly.

Honestly, the morning had gone pretty darn well. Lilypaw had a wonderful morning of training, the border patrol had nothing to report, and the hunting patrol I'd sent didn't seem to have any issues.

But still...

No matter how well things go, there was always this little part of me wondering if I was doing enough or if someone else could do it better.

As I had been, I kept telling myself I'd get the hang of this eventually, but so far, it's just me trying not to trip over my own paws while pretending I've got it all together. Spoiler: I don't.

But that didn't matter right now. I'd done all of my tasks for the first part of the day, and now, Thornclaw and I were on our way to visit Oreo. *Finally.*

We were already out of Clan territory at this point. I didn't even necessarily need to look at our surroundings – just one look at Thornclaw's tense demeanor said it all. He practically looked like he wanted to dig his face into the grass once the Twoleg nests came into sight.

And I wrapped my tail around his shoulders in support as we began to navigate our way through the neighborhood. Thank StarClan I knew the way perfectly now, so that we didn't have to spend any more time wandering around than we needed to. *Especially, when as of about a moon and a half ago, there are Twolegs around wanting to snatch up cats.*

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting out a small groan as I was briefly brought back to the moment that that stupid Twoleg had snatched me up after my last visit with Oreo, carrying me away to their stupid nest. *If that ever happens again, the Twoleg is going to lose their arm. And that's me showing mercy.*

I had to admit, I let out a big sigh of relief once Oreo's Twoleg nest came into sight. And also, knowing that my brother was just tail-lengths away actually made me pelt up to the nest in excitement.

I could hear Thornclaw purring with amusement behind me as I then arrived to the brick wall of the side of the nest. "How are we even going to get his attention?" he called out to me. "He doesn't even know we're coming."

I looked back at my mate, my eyes narrowed and a big smirk on my face. "Oh, don't you worry about that, my love."

Trying to hold back a squeal, I then led Thornclaw to the side of the Twoleg nest, where a small, familiar window stood above us. "Remember this guy?" I asked the golden brown tabby tom as I gestured up to the little window. "I tapped on this to get Oreo's attention when we were here with Wrenfeather, Lightningstrike, and Emberheart. He told me he hangs out in the room it leads to because there are lots of soft, warm things that smell good that his housefolk take out of those loud, shaky boxes."

As I had expected, Thornclaw was shaking his head slowly in amazement and confusion as I spoke. "Good for him. Glad he enjoys his soft, warm things that smell good," he muttered. He then gave me a wink. "I have that in the form of a pretty cat."

"Oh, my," I muttered to Thornclaw after I let out a snort and furrowed my eyebrows. I then leapt up to the window, making sure I had a good grip in the brick wall before reaching over with a paw and giving the glass a tap. "I'm not sure whether to take that as a compliment."

"It was supposed to be one!" Thornclaw called up to me, sounding genuinely insistent, which amused me.

I let out a purr of amusement, looking down at Thornclaw with a warm, reassuring look. "I know, I was just teasing," I meowed as I then looked into the window hopefully. "Kind of a weird compliment though."

"I think that calling a cat warm, soft, and good-smelling is pretty nice!" Thornclaw insisted to me as I continued to purr. "I-"

I then raised my eyebrows as Thornclaw cut himself off, and he glanced toward the wooden gate that led to Oreo's backyard. "Hey!"

Before I could even question Thornclaw, I felt my heart begin to soar as I heard the voice that replied to him. "Thornclaw?" I heard the warm, welcoming voice of my brother meow. I then felt overwhelmed with eagerness and affection as the black and white

pelt of Oreo emerged through the open backyard gate, his hazel eyes wide with shock and excitement. "What the heck are you-"

I purred as Thornclaw gave Oreo a wink, gesturing with his tail up at the window I was at, causing my brother's eyes to widen even more. "Lilypetal! Two for two, no way!"

"Yes, way!" I exclaimed, leaping straight down from the window to the ground with a successful landing before running up to press my nose to Oreo's. "Oh my goodness, it is so great to see you!"

"Geez, you too, Lilypetal! It's been just a bit too long for my liking," Oreo replied, giving me a light nudge and touching the tip of his tail to Thornclaw's shoulder in greeting. "What are you two doing here, and why do you two actually look calm and intact despite that?"

I let out a sigh, exchanging a look with Thornclaw before shrugging. "We toughed it out to come visit you," I told Oreo as I ruffled his head fur with my tail. "Life has been so crazy, so while I had some time, Thornclaw suggested we come down and pay you a visit."

"Aw, well, I'm honored you took that extra time to... see *me*, my gosh!" Oreo purred, his hazel eyes full of affection. He then flashed me a brief look of concern. "Life's been crazy, huh? Are you doing okay?"

All I felt I could do was give Oreo a nod, hoping that I wasn't already giving away my exhaustion or unconsciously airing out all of the anxiety I'd felt since my nightmare this morning. "Yes, I promise."

Oreo leaned his head towards me, his hazel eyes narrowed for a moment. "Allllllright," he answered, clearly skeptical. He then gave a shrug himself. "Well, you're the toughest, most resilient cat that I know. I have no doubt that you're knocking life and your duties out of the park."

"She's *what-ing* her life and duties out of the *what?*" Thornclaw asked Oreo, looking as confused as if someone had told him that the

legendary Tallstar actually wasn't tall.

Oreo let out a purr. "She's doing really well, is what I meant."

"Ah, now that I get," Thornclaw purred, nodding to Oreo in thanks before looking at me, his gaze sharp, but also full of affection and warmth. "And I agree."

I rolled my eyes, flicking Thornclaw's ear affectionately. "Oh, enough about me," I purred before looking back at Oreo as my tail began to lash back and forth enthusiastically. "How have things been for you here? Gosh, how's *your* life?"

"Pretty darn nice, if I do say so myself!" Oreo meowed, his tone light and cheerful. "I've got nice housefolk, a nice house, and cheese given to me at my disposal. I definitely can't complain."

Thornclaw narrowed his eyes, furrowing his eyebrows. "Cheese?" he asked, his voice dripping with skepticism.

"Oh!" I cut in, flicking my tail as I tried to explain. "Cheese is this weird stuff that Twolegs make from the milk from cows." Thornclaw muttered a small "geez" under his breath, which made me purr with amusement. "Definitely sounds like a lovely time... for a kittypet!" I added with a teasing smirk before tilting my head thoughtfully. "Wait—you really have cheese at your disposal?"

"Sure do!" Oreo replied with a proud purr. His hazel eyes gleamed as he added, "Do you all want some?"

Thornclaw let out a reluctant hiss and flicked his ears back. "That's alright. Thanks, though," he said curtly.

I hesitated, my curiosity battling with my self-control. "Oooooh goodness," I finally meowed, shaking my head, "I'm going to have to resist the urge. I'll pass too."

Oreo let out a soft purr and lightly rested the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "You are very strong," he teased. Then, his gaze flicked to the window I had tapped on earlier. "Anyway," he said, glancing back at me, "were you trying to get my attention at the laundry window again?"

"Yeah!" I answered, my whiskers twitching. "You told me that you love to roll around in the warm clothes after they come out of the dryer, right?"

Oreo rolled his eyes and gave a small shrug. "Yeah... and you're right. That is usually what I'm doing this time of day..." His voice trailed off, and I watched curiously as he hesitated, his hazel eyes gleaming with something I couldn't quite place. He shifted his paws back and forth, suddenly looking uneasy. "But..."

"Oreo?"

I then nearly gasped at the voice that I heard. Not because I was startled this time, oh *no*.

I then glanced back at Thornclaw as I heard light footsteps coming our way. *That was a she-cat's voice*, I thought to myself as I smirked back at my mate. *Coming from inside Oreo's yard.*

I then looked back towards the backyard fence that Oreo had entered through just earlier, my eyes already widening with excitement. *Is this...?*

I then let out another gasp, my mouth dropping when a figure finally emerged through the open backyard gate once again. A she-cat indeed, and just by the look that wiped over Oreo's eyes as soon as she appeared, I knew that this had to be the she-cat that my brother had caught feelings for.

She was stunning, that's for sure. So much so that I almost considered covering Thornclaw's eyes. *And possibly mine too. Goodness.* She was a pale ginger tabby with a white chest and ear tips, and she had some of the most unique eyes I'd ever seen – pale blue with some amber flecks.

And they were large with curiosity and concern as she trotted over to join Oreo, Thornclaw, and me. "Oh, hi there!" she meowed kindly, even though it was clear she was just a bit wary. "Sorry to interrupt. Oreo had been away from the backyard for a bit, so I was just making sure that everything's okay!"

I then flicked my ears as her gaze fell on me, her gaze now narrowed with mischief and curiosity still. "And I think I can be certain things are..." she murmured as she padded up to me. She then looked back at Oreo in amazement for just a moment. "Oreo, is this Lilypetal? Your sister?"

"Sure is!" Oreo meowed, his tail flicking with excitement.

"My goodness, how did you know?" I replied, cocking an eyebrow in amazement.

"The hazel eyes, for sure!" Chloe purred. "But Oreo's told me all about you too. You're a Clan cat, and you're second in command to the leader of your Clan, right?"

I nodded, genuinely impressed by how much she knew. Chloe gave a small shrug and an amused purr. "Trust me, Oreo's gushed all about you."

Oh, how he's told me about you too, I thought, but I decided to withhold that information—for both their sakes. Instead, I turned to Oreo, giving him a knowing look. "And Oreo's told me that he met someone here in the Twolegplace!" My ears flicked as I realized that my silly goose of a brother had never told me the name of the she-cat he was padding after. "And your name is...?"

"Oh! I'm Chloe." She paused for a moment, her head tilted as if searching her memory. Oreo's eyes gleamed as he watched her. *Wow,* I couldn't help but think. *He is down bad.*

Finally, Chloe's ears perked, and she meowed, "Lilypetal, right? Such a pretty name."

"Aw, thank you!" I purred, genuinely warmed by her compliment. She seemed so sweet, it was *impossible* not to like her. "It's so lovely to meet you!"

"And you too!" Chloe chirped. Her gaze shifted to Thornclaw, giving him a polite nod before narrowing her eyes inquisitively. "And you are..." she trailed off, studying him intently. After a moment, her ears flicked with realization. "Thornclaw, right? You're Lilypetal's

mate! You led the patrol that came here to rescue her, didn't you?"

Thornclaw dipped his head in acknowledgment, and I couldn't help but think, *Don't look at her too long, Thornclaw. Don't look at her too long...*

"I did!" he replied politely. "But I couldn't have done it all without Oreo."

"Aw, shucks," Oreo muttered, looking down shyly.

Chloe nudged him gently, her eyes sparkling as she turned back to him. "Oh, give yourself some credit! You were so brave to lead that gigantic Clan patrol and direct them like that." She then turned back to Thornclaw and me. "But anyway, it's seriously so wonderful to meet you both. It's about time!"

"Agreed," I muttered, raising an eyebrow at Oreo to tease him. Then, a thought struck me, and my ears twitched. "Oh, I hope we didn't interrupt you all from anything!"

Oreo let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Oh please, this is the best interruption I could ever ask for!"

"Absolutely!" Chloe chimed in, her tail swishing with excitement. "We were just chatting in the backyard and playing with some of our toys. And honestly, I'd give away every toy I had if it meant I finally got to meet you all!"

Oreo beamed. "Oh, this is just the beginning, Chloe! Remember how I told you that Lilypetal and Thornclaw have kits too?"

Chloe's eyes widened, and she gasped. "Two different litters, right? Oh, yes, please bring them next time!"

Thornclaw purred in amusement. "Even if they're all grown up?"

"That doesn't matter to me!" Chloe sniffed, looking back at Oreo with shining eyes. "I'd just love to meet more of your family."

I glanced at Thornclaw, and we exchanged a quick nod of approval. "Then that we shall do!" I purred. "I know they'd love to meet you

too."

"Yay! Perfect!" Chloe meowed, her excitement palpable. Then, as if remembering something, her ears perked. "Oh, by the way—Oreo, I also came here because I thought I saw your housefolk grabbing some cheese cubes out of the fridge from inside. Do you want me to try and grab some for you?"

Oreo's eyes lit up, and he licked his lips. "Oh, heck yes! You know I do! Do you need help?"

Chloe gave a confident lash of her tail. "Oh, no! I'm alright. After you taught me that begging tactic—the tilt of the head, the big eyes, and the ears down—I think I can get any amount of cheese that I'd like."

The pale ginger tabby then turned to us, her eyes wide. "Do either of you want some cheese?"

Oreo rolled his eyes and sniffed. "Oh, don't worry about them, Chloe—they both said no."

"Well..." I glanced at Thornclaw with a mischievous look. "Now that I've been asked twice, I feel like it's a sign..."

Thornclaw groaned. "Great StarClan."

I turned back to Chloe, my whiskers twitching with amusement. "I will take a single cheese cube. Thank you!"

Chloe let out a mrrow of laughter. "Of course, it's no problem! You sure you don't want one, Thornclaw?"

Thornclaw purred and padded up to me, twining his tail with mine. "Although this may be a sign for me too, I think I'll still pass. Thank you." He hesitated, his whiskers twitching in thought. "The thought of consuming anything that comes from a cow, to me... is a weird thought."

Chloe purred with amusement as the rest of us chuckled. "Fair enough!" she meowed, touching her nose to Oreo's before padding toward the backyard gate. "I'll be right back!"

"Alright!" Oreo called after her, then turned back to us. I had to hold back laughter, knowing that my brother was going to look back to find Thornclaw and I staring at him with smug expressions.

And when he did, he indeed let out a huff and gave a roll of his eyes. "Oh, come on," Oreo groaned. "Stop looking at me like that."

"I can't help it!" I squealed. "Oreo, that's... *her*, isn't it? She seems amazing!"

Oreo's bashful look returned as he glanced down. "Yeah... she is. Definitely."

I could hardly stand how sweet it was. "So kind, thoughtful, genuine... and so pretty too!"

Oreo snorted, lifting his head to reveal his glittering eyes. "Oh, yeah. She for sure is."

"Like, oh my *gosh*, she is so pretty!"

Oreo raised an eyebrow and tilted his head, though amusement glinted in his eyes. "Should I be worried?"

"Goodness, no," I purred, nudging Thornclaw, who looked amused but jokingly concerned. "Not when I've got you." I licked Thornclaw's cheek before turning back to Oreo. "I'm just so happy for you."

"Happy for me, huh?" Oreo meowed, his tone mischievous now.

I blinked in confusion, glancing at Thornclaw. "Well... yeah, right? Because she's your..." My voice trailed off as I stared intensely at him. "She is, right? Things worked out with her... *right?*"

Oreo purred with amusement, his shoulders relaxing as he nodded. "Ha, I just wanted to pull your tail a bit." He then glanced over his shoulder, his hazel eyes gleaming before looking back at the two of us with a gaze full of love. "Yes, we are mates."

I let out an excited squeal, and I heard Thornclaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Oreo, that is fantastic!" I exclaimed. "I mean, I've only

seen you two with each other for this bit, but you two seem so sweet together." I padded up to him, touching my nose to his ear. "I am so, so happy for you, Oreo."

Then, I stepped back, taking a deep, shaky breath. "And I know Mistpelt would have absolutely loved her."

Oreo took a deep breath, his chest rising as if bracing himself for something momentous. "Oh, I know she would have," he said, his voice steady but warm. "I wouldn't have settled for anything less."

I exchanged a loving, knowing look with him. *Seriously, Mistpelt would have loved to see Oreo with someone just as kind, genuine, and wonderful as he is. I can pretty much picture her look of approval and satisfaction.*

Then, Oreo's gaze darted back toward the backyard gate. "And you know what? She said that she didn't need help, but with all the cheese she's grabbing, I think I may still want to be in there with her," he added.

"Awwwwww," I teased, tilting my head toward him with a mischievous grin. "Missing her already?"

"Oh, Lilypetal..." Thornclaw groaned beside me, his tone a mix of exasperation and fondness.

Oreo's ears twitched as he shot me a defensive look. "Hey! Even if I was, what's wrong with that?"

I shrugged, my smirk softening into something more genuine. "Absolutely nothing," I assured him. Then, turning to Thornclaw, I brushed my tail lightly along his shoulder, feeling the familiar warmth of his presence. "I know what that's like, on both sides." With a flick of my tail, I urged Oreo forward. "Go on, you're fine! We'll see you in a moment."

"Darn right, you will!" Oreo meowed with a laugh, his paws already carrying him toward the backyard fence. "Be right back!"

For a moment, I simply watched him go, my heart full of gratitude for this visit. With a content sigh, I leaned my head against

Thornclaw's sturdy shoulder. "Wow, Thornclaw," I murmured, letting the words settle between us. "This visit is already everything I could have imagined – I get to see Oreo, and find out that he's with such a wonderful she-cat. And... and *cheese!*"

Thornclaw chuckled, the sound low and affectionate. When I glanced up at him, I found his pale blue eyes filled with such warmth that my stomach did a little flip. "You're very cute," he said, his voice tender as he pulled away slightly to meet my gaze directly. "And you are the most beautiful she-cat in the world in my eyes. That could never change."

I blinked at him, startled by how effortlessly he seemed to read my mind from earlier. "And you are the most handsome tom in the whole world," I replied. I then narrowed my eyes back at him, giving him a nudge "In fact, my perception of you is *solid.*"

Thornclaw rolled his eyes, letting out a mock sigh. "Thanks. Very comforting words. I wonder who came up with those?"

"Someone very cool, I'm sure," I quipped, bringing the two of us to purr with amusement. As the laughter faded, I let out a deep, contented sigh. "Thank you so much for the idea to come here, Thornclaw. This is exactly what I needed."

"Of course, Lilypetal," he said softly. "Always."

I leaned into his side once again, another sigh escaping me – one filled with a bit more dread. "Hey, are you okay?" Thornclaw asked, his concern immediate and tangible.

"Yeah... just... mentally preparing to get back to camp soon, and back to duties," I admitted, the weight of my responsibilities pressing down on me like a heavy fog.

Thornclaw's eyes softened with worry as he studied me. "I see," he said gently. "I hate that you seem so nervous about it."

"Me too," I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper. Taking a deep breath, I tried to put my jumbled thoughts into words. "I really hope I don't mess anything up. Or disappoint anybody."

Thornclaw's expression shifted to one of genuine shock. "Lilypetal, you could never. I promise."

I glanced up at him as my heart filled with gratitude. "Thank you," I said sincerely. "It's just... all so much. I hate that I can't be fully awake to take it all on with these nightmares going on too, and I worry that I'm not living up to... I mean, do I even...?" My words trailed off as I caught the concerned look in his eyes. I then gave a quick shake of my head. "Forget it. It's all just new deputy jitters, surely."

"That completely makes sense," Thornclaw meowed, his understanding tone doing little to mask his unease. "But I hate that you're feeling this way. Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

"I'm sure. I promise," I said, forcing a brighter gaze as I tried to convince myself as much as him. Letting out a sigh, I added, "I'll get there when I get there, and I'll do my duties to the best of my abilities. But for now, I'm going to live in the moment, enjoy my time with you, my brother, and his mate, and eat some darn good delicious cheese."

Chapter 6

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Great StarClan, the look on Pebblefoot's face will never leave me, I'm telling you," Dustystorm was meowing to me, his tone of full of amusement and his pale blue eyes glowing with pride.

My eyes widened in curiosity as I looked back at my mate and gave a flick of my tail. I had never been so invested in a story. "And what about Rushpaw's?"

Dustystorm gave a single snort. "Oh, I'm sure it would have hurt me too much to look at him," Dustystorm replied, shaking his head dramatically. "Surely, he had a face full of *dejection*."

My eyes were now wide as I slowly shook my head back and forth in disbelief. "And you're seriously telling me that my sister jumped into the lake just to prove that she can swim in front of two RiverClan cats?"

Dustystorm's purr of amusement rumbled deep in his chest. "That is exactly what she did!" He beamed to me, causing me to purr with amusement. "Gosh, I think we both wanted to slap those smug looks off of their faces. How insufficient do you have to feel to brag to ThunderClan cats that – as a RiverClan cat - you know how to swim and trained your apprentice to do the same?"

I smirked and cocked a single eyebrow. "More insufficient than a fish, I suppose!" I then blinked to Dustystorm, prompting him to go on. "And... so Emberheart...?"

"Jumped in the lake," Dustystorm said with a gleam in his eyes.

"Jumped in the lake," I repeated back to my mate.

"Strutted over to the edge of the island," he continued, drawing out

the words with exaggerated drama, "and jumped in the lake."

"Jumped in the lake," I echoed again.

"Jumped in the lake and did a lap around the island, in fact," Dustystorm finished, sitting back with an air of triumph.

"Wow," I breathed, hardly being able to take in just how awesome this story was.

"Oh, don't act like you wouldn't have done the same," he teased, narrowing his eyes knowingly. "I know you would have."

"Well, of course, I would have!" I shot back, pretending to sound offended. "I'm just trying to process how proud I am that my sister did too."

Dustystorm's whiskers twitched as he nodded. "Oh, I wasn't surprised at all," he then meowed smugly. After being her mentor, I know she'll never miss an opportunity to show other cats what she's got."

"As she absolutely should!" I declared, my tail curling with satisfaction. "Great StarClan, that's awesome!"

I then paused, a sudden thought dawning on me. "Wait, so does that mean you taught her how to swim when you trained her?"

"I did!" Dustystorm replied enthusiastically. "I've told you that I know how to swim, right?"

"Yeah!" I answered excitedly. I then tilted my head, my gaze looking up to the sky as I tried to recall the details my dusty gray mate had once shared with me. "You said you have that pond of... kay fish."

"No," Dustystorm said flatly, though I could tell he was holding back a purr.

"Kai fish?"

"No."

"...oh!" I exclaimed with another flick of my ears. "Koi fish, right? When you were a kittypet?"

"Exactly," he said, his voice warm with approval as he then gave a shrug. "Thought I might as well pass my entire skillset onto her."

"Well then," I purred before giving my mate a lick on the cheek. "She must've been exhausted because that's a *wide* range of skills." After Dustystorm gave me a lick on the ear in return, I stared at him in shock as something else crossed my mind. "But were you not afraid?"

Dustystorm tilted his head, confused. "Afraid of what?"

"That you were going to *drown* her?" I asked my mate, my eyes wide.

He snorted, looking both smug and proud as he flicked his tail. "Nah. I knew she had it from the beginning." He then gave a sniff. "And clearly, she did. And now she's using it to make others look stupid!"

"Most importantly!" I agreed with a loud purr, and we *mrrowed* with laughter.

And as the laughter faded, I couldn't help but just stare affectionately back at Dustystorm for a moment. Great *StarClan*, how I loved talking with him like this—just the two of us bantering about who knows what and beyond. It was one of the many reasons why I was certain we were meant to be together – we were both too goofy for most other cats to stand. We were both fully-grown warriors, sure, but both kits at heart in the best way.

I would always treasure moments getting to talk to each other like this, especially since we hadn't had a chance to talk since the Gathering last night. *It's truly a cruel world... but I deal.*

As the purring fully died down, I stretched lazily, flicking Dustystorm's ear with my tail. "Anyway, did anything else interesting happen at the Gathering for you last night?" I asked.

Dustystorm tilted his head thoughtfully, his whiskers twitching as

he thought. "Hm... I don't think so!" he answered me. "I spoke with Crowfrost for a while, wandered around with Emberheart, watched her make like a fish... but that's about it!"

I purred in amusement. "And I loved hearing about every moment of it!"

My stomach then filled with dread as it fully hit me that Dustystorm was done with his recap of the night – meaning, it was my turn. *Shoot. Here goes.* "But if that's all for you..." I began, flicking my tail and fixing him with a serious look as I tried to push down my nerves. "I need to tell you what *I* dealt with last night."

Dustystorm's ears immediately perked up, and his eyes filled with concern. "Uh-oh. That's not a good face," he meowed cautiously, though his pale blue eyes glinted with humor.

"It definitely could be a better face," I admitted with a small, dramatic sigh. "So, guess what?"

Dustystorm's expression shifted into one of both fear and intrigue, his whiskers twitching nervously.

Time to drop the ball. And it's not a fun, squeaky ball like the ones Lilypetal or Dustystorm or Nightwing have told me about that they played with as kittypets. One of the big, heavy ones that hurts your head if it hits you. "Breezepelt was weirding me out a bit last night," I announced.

With my words, Dustystorm's fur bristled slightly, but he tilted his head, seemingly trying to stay calm. "Weirding you out? In what way?"

"Oh, well, luckily he didn't talk to me or anything," I began, flicking my tail dismissively. "But he was definitely looking my way. A *lot*." I explained to my mate. "He looked like he maybe wanted to talk to me, but I think I probably looked like I had claws for eyes, and he didn't bother."

Dustystorm sniffed, his eyes glinting briefly with amusement. "Good. That's my Goldenshine."

"Thanks very much," I said with a playful dip of my head. Then I paused, thinking back to the scene. "He was glancing over at Swiftflight a lot too. He even looked like he was going to go over and talk to *him* too, but then the Gathering started. So strange, right?"

Dustystorm sniffed again, but this time there was no humor in it. *Yikers.* "Strange is a word for it..." His claws flexed slightly, and he seemed to be holding back a frustrated hiss. "Gosh, I really don't like that."

"I don't either!" I agreed, the fur along my spine prickling as I continued to relive those extremely uncomfortable moments. "And I mean... after all he's done... or tried to do to me," I glanced worriedly at Dustystorm, "to you... and after being an ally with the Dark Forest, I just can't believe that he'd even think that Swiftflight or I would give him the time of day."

Dustystorm's tail lashed once. "And if he keeps trying?"

"Then I'll keep pushing him away. What else would I do?" I said, fixing him with a reassuring look. But when I noticed how deeply lost in thought he seemed, I softened my tone. "Are you okay?"

He shook his head as if trying to clear away his thoughts. "Yes, of course I am! I just..." He let out a huff, his ears flattening briefly. "This worries me. I just don't want him to bother you two, or hurt you, or..." He shook his head again, his voice dropping a bit lower as his eyes darkened. "He's one of the most conniving, dangerous cats I've ever seen, and I just can't believe that WindClan is keeping him there scot-free. I just hope that you're not in danger."

I then raised my eyebrows as he sighed, rolling his eyes slightly before adding, "And I promise I'm not just being this way because he was your mate before me. I'd think this either way."

I reached up and ruffled the fur on the top of his head with my paw, my whiskers twitching in amusement. "Oh, I know you would," I meowed affectionately before looking away and giving another sigh. "And you're right. Don't worry—I'll make sure he stays far away from the both of us."

Dustystorm sniffed again, his pale blue eyes steady. "Let me know if it becomes too much. Then *I* will."

I purred and leaned into his side. "Oh, I'll be fine."

"I know you are," he meowed, sounding genuine. "But let me know if I at least need to stand a few tail-lengths behind him at a Gathering... just give him a threatening stare or something."

That image made me snort. *Even if it's not necessary, I kind of just want to see that for funsies.*

Before I could respond to Dustystorm, a flicker of movement caught my eye—a flash of a gray tabby pelt approaching us from the corner of my vision.

"Ooo, that does sound fun!" I said with a mischievous grin. "I'll let you know when the Gathering gets closer." Then I peered past Dustystorm to the approaching figure. "What's up, my favorite medicine cat?" I called out cheerfully before pausing. "Oh, wait, second favorite."

Jayfeather rolled his eyes so hard I thought they might get stuck. *Gosh, that tom has rolled his eyes so many times, I'm surprised they aren't stuck that way by now.* "I'm sure Snowflight's heart briefly stopped from up in StarClan," he said dryly.

As I rolled my eyes right back at him, he padded up closer to me and my mate. "Are you and Dustystorm completely enthralled in conversation," he asked, clearly unimpressed, "or are you able to come to the medicine den and eat some traveling herbs?"

I flicked my ears and felt my mouth drop, and my stomach twisted for a moment as realization seemed to take over my entire body. "Oh my goodness!" I gasped, my eyes darting up to the sinking sun as it crept toward the tops of the trees. "I didn't realize it was already so late!"

"You never realize," Jayfeather meowed dryly, his tone as flat as ever.

Dustystorm glanced at me with amusement as I jumped to my paws

like a startled rabbit. "Oh, that's right! It's the Moonpool trip tonight, isn't it?" he asked.

I gave my mate an eager nod. "It sure is!" I replied, my tail twitching with urgency. I turned to Jayfeather with wide eyes. "And we have to leave *so soon!*"

"Would you have realized that if I hadn't come over here?" Jayfeather retorted, his blind blue eyes narrowed.

I shrugged, pausing just long enough to put the tip of my tail on Dustystorm's shoulder. "Maybe I would've eventually gotten there," I said innocently, "but talking to this tom is pretty nice."

"Then maybe said tom can be the one to remind you next time," Jayfeather meowed with a flick of his tail. I rolled my eyes at his grumpiness but couldn't help noticing the tiniest gleam in his sharp blue eyes as he glanced at Dustystorm.

Gosh, for Jayfeather, that was practically the warmest of glances. It was his way of saying he was kidding—or so I liked to believe.

Without waiting for a reply, he spun around and started padding toward the medicine den. "Anyway, come on. Like you said, we have to leave soon."

"I'll be there in a moment!" I called enthusiastically after him.

"We don't *have* a moment!" Jayfeather growled, his voice drifting back to me like a cold breeze.

"Too bad!" I shouted, sticking my tongue out even though he couldn't see it. Turning to Dustystorm, I pressed my muzzle to his, my heart already sinking at the thought of having to leave him. "Bye, Dustystorm. I love you."

"I love you too," he murmured, his voice soft but his eyes serious as they then met mine. "And thank you for telling me about Breezepelt. *Seriously*, let me know if things get any worse or any weirder."

I gave the dusty gray tom the most sincere nod that I could. "I will,"

I promised, touching my nose to the top of his head.

And as I padded away, I slowed for a moment, catching the faint sound of his sigh behind me. At this, my ears twitched, and my stomach twisted slightly. *Uh, oh. Is he really that worried about all of that?*

I then gave a flick of my ears. *I mean, I am too—kind of.* But I was still hoping to StarClan that it wouldn't turn into anything serious. Breezepelt was just being... *Breezepelt*. I was also keeping in mind Jayfeather's words about how unpredictable he was.

And, sure, Dustystorm was probably a little intimidated by the whole "former mate acting weird" situation, but he really didn't have anything to worry about. *Hopefully*.

I shook the thoughts away with a sigh as I crawled into the medicine den, where Jayfeather was already gathering the herbs we'd need. For tonight, it was just poppy seeds to suppress hunger—thank *StarClan* for small mercies. Luckily, the trip to the Moonpool wasn't too grueling, but my stomach always ended up screaming at me by the time we returned just after moonhigh.

Jayfeather seemed to sense my presence – or maybe he just heard my stomping, quick paws – as soon as I came into the den. "About time you showed up," he grumbled to me.

"Oh, please. Gimme the poppy seeds," I replied. Jayfeather then proceeded to *toss* them at me with all the grace of a badger kicking dirt.

I let out a mockingly-dramatic gasp as the tiny black seeds scattered across my fur. "Gee, *thanks!*" I meowed, sniffing with amusement as I swatted the seeds off my pelt.

"Mmhm," Jayfeather replied, his tone flat as ever as he bent to collect his own poppy seeds.

I then let out a sigh as I then watched the medicine cat for a moment, tilting my head thoughtfully. *Goodness, how did I ever become so close with this cranky medicine cat?* I asked myself in

complete bewilderment as I shook my head slowly. *And how do I actually look forward to these Moonpool trips that we've decided to take every month together?*

All insane, but it was true. And crazy enough, and most would probably agree, Jayfeather and I had probably been through a whole lot more together than most best friends had.

I then let out an almost inaudible snort. *Best friends. Best friends with Jayfeather. Great StarClan, that's crazy.*

But again, all true. And I couldn't have been more thankful to be by his side in all that we have gone through – with the Dark Forest, Snowstorm, and everything in between. *I mean, truthfully, I don't think we'd ever hardly cross paths if it wasn't for Snowflight. And that is what has bolstered our relationship, but it's even more than that now.*

And I couldn't help but feel a wave of gratitude as I plopped my poppy seeds into my mouth. "So, anything in particular you plan on asking at the Moonpool tonight?"

Jayfeather glanced at me with what I could only describe as a look of deep disappointment. "Why you speak with your mouth full."

I rolled my eyes and swallowed the seeds. "Oh, get over it! Seriously, though—anything pressing?" I paused, a mischievous glint sparking in my eyes as I put on the most annoying voice that was possible to do. "Well, other than, 'I miss you, I miss you, oh, how I *miss* you.'"

Jayfeather gave me one of his trademark cold stares and gave one sharp but small flick of his tail. "I'll maybe throw in one or two of those after I ring your neck," he muttered through gritted teeth, but then his tone softened a bit as he added, "Otherwise, I just would like to see her and check on her."

I blinked at him, my annoying voice remaining. "Gosh, you love her."

"Shut up," he snapped, his ears flattening in irritation.

"You love her sooooo much," I teased.

Jayfeather scoffed. "Well, what about you, Golden-loses-track-of-time-because-she-loves-her-mate-shine?" he shot back, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "What do you plan on asking?"

I tilted my head thoughtfully, glancing down at the smooth ground of the medicine den. "Hm... there's nothing pressing right now," I admitted after a moment. Then, as if a spark of excitement lit within me, I looked back up at him. "I mean... it's Snowflight. Just the fact that we can go to the Moonpool now and speak with her for a moment is enough."

It was still so surreal to me that Jayfeather and I had the opportunity to do this. This whole thing started just a few days after the battle ended. The time that the two of us had spent with Snowflight, of course, wasn't *nearly* enough, so we had tried our paw at seeing her at the Moonpool one night. And sure enough, she came to see us. From there, Jayfeather and I decided to come see her at least once every moon – promising to bring more of our family if there was ever an opportunity.

It was a comforting ritual, one I hoped would last a long while. Being able to catch up with Snowflight after everything that had happened meant the world to me. And again, doing it with Jayfeather was a part of why I appreciated it.

My gaze then drifted back to the medicine cat, and I gave him a small tap on the shoulder with my tail. "And getting to go with you and hang out for a bit is pretty cool too," I added, a touch of sincerity slipping into my voice. "I'm really thankful for that."

Jayfeather sniffed, standing up and brushing past me. "Gross. Let's go."

I shook my head, smirking as I began to pad toward the den's entrance. "Oh, don't worry, I'm not offended!"

"I wasn't worried," he replied flatly.

"No, no, I understand!" I continued, the smirk growing wider as I then padded past him. "I know what that means. 'Gross' actually is code for 'Me too, Goldenshine. You drive me nuts, but I could not

be more glad that we are best friends, and the fact that I can tolerate these trips with you—or anything else—says a lot.'" I paused mid-step and threw him a sheepish look over my shoulder. "Right?"

Jayfeather just shook his head at me. However, there was the smallest bit of warmth in his eyes as he gave me a shrug and let the moment pass without argument.

I let out a satisfied grunt as I turned and continued walking. "Dang, I'm good."

"Whatever," he muttered behind me. "I don't even understand how you do that."

"Flesh out one word into several?" I asked, glancing back at him with a mischievous glint in my eye. "Jayfeather, you must remember that my son shares blood with your father and your half-brother. I am completely trained in this area."

To my surprise, at my words, Jayfeather's eyes widened and he gave a flick of his ears. "Ah, that reminds me. How was—"

Before he could finish, I let out a startled screech and jumped back as a flash of white fur darted in front of me. My heart thudded in my chest as I gasped, "Good golly gosh!"

"Goldenshine?" Jayfeather called out sharply from behind me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed, my fur still fluffed up in surprise. As my vision cleared, I saw the familiar white-and-gray pelt I had nearly run into.

I then let out a relieved sigh, and a purr of amusement bubbled up in my throat. "Snowstorm completely scared me!"

"Snowstorm?" Jayfeather echoed, padding up to stand beside me.

"Yeah, she was standing right outside the entrance!" I replied, my voice full of laughter. Turning my attention to the younger she-cat, I tilted my head. "Is everything okay?"

Snowstorm nodded quickly, her eyes wide with reassurance. "Yes, absolutely! Sorry I scared you..."

I shrugged, my tail flicking lightly behind me. "Eh, it keeps me alive," I replied with a smirk, bringing Jayfeather to snort beside me. "So, what's up?"

Snowstorm tilted her head to the side, her gaze flitting everywhere shyly and sheepishly as she slightly hesitated. "Well, I was hoping to catch you two before your trip to the Moonpool. I was out on patrol the last time you all left, so... this time, I wanted to ask if I could come along with you?" Her voice was cautious yet hopeful as she added, "To see Snowflight?"

Whoa.

Jayfeather and I exchanged a glance, even though it wasn't like Jayfeather could see me. Still, the silent understanding between us was there. "Really?" I asked, turning my attention back to Snowstorm.

"I mean, yeah! If you'll have me?" she replied quickly, her voice picking up with eagerness. "She was a part of me for so long. You two have told me a lot, but... I would love to see her and, I guess, *meet* her, if I could?"

I flicked my ears thoughtfully, her words causing my head to spin in the most exciting way. Goodness, I hadn't thought about it much until now, but Snowstorm was the one cat here who had never come face-to-face with Snowflight since she had been released.

I mean, of *course* she hadn't. She had been out cold when Snowflight was finally released from her body. This would be the first time she'd actually see the soul that had lived within her for so long—the incredible, wonderful soul that had shared her being. My chest swelled with excitement at the thought.

This was a big deal.

Jayfeather gave a small nod, and I didn't even try to hide my enthusiasm as I exclaimed, "If you could?" I then gave a quick shake

of my head to recollect myself. "I mean—of course you could! I mean, you *can*! Snowstorm, I'm sure Snowflight would love to see you too!"

Snowstorm's eyes brightened. "Amazing! Then I'm there." She paused, her gaze flickering away for a moment as she shook her head slightly. "To be honest, I'm still figuring out how it all works. The cat who was once a part of me is now somewhere else and is excited to see me? Weird."

"Super trippy, right?" I said, flicking my tail in agreement.

"The trippiest," Jayfeather deadpanned in a completely monotone voice, which somehow made both Snowstorm and me purr with amusement. "Snowstorm, do you need any traveling herbs before we go?"

Snowstorm shook her head, her tail flicking as if to urge us on. "Nah, I should be okay! After another hunting patrol earlier today and just getting to relax in camp since then, I'm ready to burn out some energy!"

"Fair enough," Jayfeather replied with a small nod. "Then let's get out of here—the sun is already beginning to set."

I gave my best friend an eager nod. "Yay! Let's go!" I cheered, bounding forward. Jayfeather and I led the way out of the camp's entrance and into the forest, Snowstorm padding just behind us.

And gosh, my excitement rushed through me as the three of us began our journey, the anticipation of what lay ahead seeming to fill the entire evening forest.

Chapter 7

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

The crickets were just starting to chirp, and the setting sun brought the trees to cast an ominous, yet beautiful shadow onto our walking path as Jayfeather and I padded side by side through the forest, with Snowstorm trailing just behind us.

Wanting to kill some time with conversation as we traveled, I glanced back at white she-cat, her white pelt gleaming faintly under the emerging moonlight. "So, Snowstorm," I began, flicking my tail playfully, "how was your first Gathering post-Dark Forest? Oh!" I paused dramatically, smirking. "Post-Snowflight, too, I guess."

Snowstorm purred softly, her eyes narrowing in thought. "A good question!" she replied, tilting her head. "On the Snowflight side of things, I guess not too much has changed?" She furrowed her eyebrows for a moment, her pawsteps slowing. "I mean, I told Swiftflight how free I felt after she went up to StarClan, but, like I said, I'm still a bit confused by it all.."

Snowstorm then looked back down at Jayfeather and me. "Snowflight is in StarClan, but... does she still make up who I am at all?"

Jayfeather sniffed, his blind blue eyes seeming to pierce right through her. "She always will," he said firmly. "She'll always be a part of who you are and who you've become, but now her own separate spirit is free to live up in StarClan. I imagine you just get to take all that you've received from her and live your life how you fully choose to."

I flicked my ear and glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. "You *imagine?*" I teased.

Jayfeather's whiskers twitched irritably. "Listen," he muttered, "I'm

still learning about all of this myself. Witnessing both Cinderheart and Snowstorm go through this only made me more confused, but I'm trying to understand."

Snowstorm dipped her head sympathetically. "That's completely understandable," she said. "Either way, both you and Goldenshine clearly understood just enough to be able to help me... or Snowflight... or both of us? Whatever." She gave a small purr, her tone lightening. "You helped us fulfill what we... *both* needed to, and I couldn't be more grateful."

Jayfeather dipped his head in acknowledgment while I gave the younger she-cat a warm look. "Of course, Snowstorm. And I'm so glad to hear that you feel free."

"I do," she replied softly, returning my same gaze before falling into thought again. "Hmm... Gathering-wise, that luckily felt pretty normal too! Everyone seemed to be getting along."

The white she-cat's blue eyes then darkened just a bit. "But obviously, it was hard to hear about the cats that we lost."

"Of course," I murmured, my tail drooping slightly as I sighed.

"And I was worried to hear about what WindClan is dealing with," Snowstorm continued. "With... what are they called, stoats? No wonder things felt so tense when the five of us checked their border yesterday. And that must've explained that weird scent we all caught."

My gosh, that's right! With all of my own Gathering chaos, I almost completely forgot about that.

My ears twitched as I thought back to yesterday, and how all five of us had caught a scent that seemed strange, and that seemed like an animal, but we couldn't place it. *I guess it must've been whatever these "stoats" are.*

I then began to shake my head slowly. "The hits just keep on coming with them, huh?" I murmured. "What even are stoats, anyway?"

Jayfeather flicked his tail next to me. "From what Kestrelflight told me," the medicine cat began, "they're kind of like weasels, except thinner and white... and more vicious."

Snowstorm wrinkled her nose. "Yikes. I wonder what they're going to do about it?"

Jayfeather then let out a huff. "If Firestar were still around," he said dryly, "I can be certain we would already be in WindClan's business about it."

"Maybe that would be a good thing?" Snowstorm suggested, her tone thoughtful. "After Onestar started talking about it last night, I began to notice all of the wounds that some WindClan cats had—Sunstrike had a huge scratch on one of her back legs, and Breezepelt had a nasty bite on his right shoulder."

Next to me, I noticed Jayfeather give a small flick of his ears. "Snowstorm," Jayfeather meowed suddenly, his tone unusually brisk, "do you mind trailing back a little bit? I need to ask Goldenshine about something."

I blinked at him, confused. "Huh?"

"Shut up," he snapped at me.

I gave a roll of my eyes. "The amount of times you've said that to me..."

Snowstorm, thankfully, didn't seem bothered. "Yeah! That's totally fine!" she said, already beginning to slow her pace, but her gaze was wary. "Can I just ask, though—you all aren't talking about me, right?"

I exchanged a quick, curious look with Jayfeather, who answered immediately, "No, we're not."

"Thank StarClan," Snowstorm meowed, her pace slowing even more. "Before I knew about all of the Snowflight business and I caught you all doing that..." Her voice trailed off, her ears twitching uncomfortably as she fully fell behind us. "That was weird."

Jayfeather called after her, his tone curt. "Our apologies. Thanks, Snowstorm."

Now extremely concerned and confused, I watched as Snowstorm padded farther back, her sleek figure disappearing into the shadows of the forest, her tail flicking once before vanishing completely.

Finally turning back to Jayfeather, I narrowed my eyes. "Okay, what was up with that?" I demanded, jerking my head in the direction Snowstorm had gone.

Jayfeather snorted, his whiskers twitching with irritation. "I needed to check in with you about something, you idiot," he snapped, his tail flicking against the forest floor. "What's wrong with that?"

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe the part where you made Snowstorm think we're plotting her demise?" At those words, Jayfeather let out a sigh. "Why couldn't she be around for this?"

Jayfeather paused, his blind blue eyes narrowing as if he were staring straight through me. "So, you want me to talk about Breezepelt around other cats?" he barked to me in a low voice.

Of course, with that, I immediately simmered down. "Oh," I muttered, my ears flattening slightly. "Fair enough."

Jayfeather then sighed. "I was going to ask you about him earlier before Snowstorm practically made you mark your territory in front of the medicine den."

I gasped, my fur fluffing out in indignation. "Oh my gosh, I did not!" Rolling my eyes, I then huffed. "What were you wanting to ask?"

Jayfeather's expression darkened with concern. "First off, I didn't know if he tried to bother you at all again last night?"

I flicked my tail thoughtfully, recalling the events of the Gathering. "Oh! Luckily not," I said, my voice full of relief. "I was paying attention to the leaders during the Gathering, but..." I hesitated, a prickling sensation running down my spine at the memory. "I have to admit, I felt like I was being watched a time or two."

Jayfeather let out another huff and shook his head. "Great," he muttered. "Nothing else happened?"

"No," I said with a shake of my head. "Just the weird stares and the potential advances toward Swifty and me to talk to us."

Jayfeather's head snapped toward me. "What in the name of StarClan did you just call him?"

"That's all though," I continued, not answering the medicine cat's question for my own amusement. "Why do you ask?"

"You just seem pretty phased by it, that's all," he replied, giving a shrug.

I snorted in response. "Well, with Breezepelt's track record, I think anyone would be," I told to the medicine cat. "But the fact that he was my former mate doesn't help."

Jayfeather nodded slowly, his expression unreadable. "With that in mind, this surely hasn't been the first time he's looked off at you like this. He's even talked to Swiftflight *and* you at a previous Gathering, right?"

"True," I admitted, flicking my tail in agreement. "But that was before..." I trailed off for a moment as I tried to gather my words. "Well, he's become one of the Dark Forest's strongest allies since then."

"True," Jayfeather echoed.

"And he has threatened to kill you before," I added pointedly.

"Yes."

"And Lionblaze."

"Yes."

"And..." I trailed off, the words catching in my throat as memories flashed through my mind like lightning.

Jayfeather jerked his blind gaze toward me, his voice suddenly sharp and demanding. "And what?" he pressed, his ears angling forward. I hesitated, the words tangled up in my chest. "Goldenshine," he said again, more forcefully this time, "what?"

With a heavy sigh, I finally relented, lowering my voice as if speaking the words any louder would make them more real. "He's tried to kill Dustystorm before," I admitted, my claws digging deeper into the earth. "And me."

Jayfeather's eyes seemed to blaze with an inner fire, his fur bristling. "*What?*" he snarled, his voice rising. "Goldenshine, when did this happen?"

I blinked in surprise at the medicine cat's reaction – and the fact that he *had* one, I suppose. "In the battle in the caves," I explained to my friend as a shudder ran down my spine. "I don't know if he was blind with rage... or *what*, but he was about to give me a killing blow before Dustystorm ripped him off of me."

Jayfeather's ears flicked back, and he whispered, "Thank StarClan." He gave his head a slow shake, looking visibly rattled. "I had no idea that happened. Why didn't you tell me?"

I sighed, flicking my tail dismissively. "I'm not sure if you remember, but at the time you were off in some weird place because of your prophecy," I said as I gave Jayfeather a narrow-eyed gaze. "And, oh *yeah*, you were also furious with me for telling you to let me handle Snowstorm's situation myself."

Jayfeather muttered under his breath, "I remember..." He paused, his tone shifting to concerned once again. "But why didn't you tell me after?"

"After the Dark Forest battle and beyond?" I replied to Jayfeather, my voice slightly rising. "Maybe I didn't want to think about it."

"Fair enough," Jayfeather meowed, though he still sighed heavily. "Still would have liked to know."

I raised my eyebrows, giving a tilt of my head. "Why?"

Jayfeather then gave me one of his classic half-annoyed, half-reluctant looks, causing my face to wipe over with satisfaction. "Nevermind," I then murmured.

"Oh, be quiet," Jayfeather grumbled, swiping his tail at me. "And get that stupid look off your face."

I stifled a purr of amusement, but he pressed on, his tone turning serious again. "But anyway, I also would have liked to know so that I can further understand why him looking at you and trying to talk to you makes you so nervous."

"Nervous," I echoed as I began to shake my head back and forth in... *amazement* almost, "and *so* confused. What does he think he's trying to do?"

Jayfeather's expression darkened once again, his blind gaze fixed somewhere in the distance. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "But like I said yesterday, I don't think I want you to find out. He's unpredictable, and time will only be wasted trying to guess what his goal is."

He then sighed, his fur bristling slightly. "Listen, I understand why this would worry you, but with what you and I know..." His sharp glare pierced through me. "...and what I have just found out... I don't think reciprocating his weirdness is going to be good for you. At all."

I nodded, my tail tip twitching as I absorbed every single word that the medicine cat gave me. "I know. Trust me, that's the conclusion I've come to, and it's what I've told Swiftflight I think he should do too." I hesitated, my ears twitching nervously. "It's just... going to weird me out for a bit. Especially if it continues."

Jayfeather gave a curt nod. "Let me know if it continues."

"Why?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

"I'm sorry," he shot back with a sarcastic edge, "is it a crime for me to care about your life?"

I rolled my eyes, letting out a dramatic sigh. "No. Absolutely not," I

said, sniffing and flicking my tail lightheartedly. "I would have told you either way."

"Good," he said, his tone clipped. He then gave me a hard stare as if he could see. "And next time, make the time between it happening and then telling me a bit shorter, please."

I gave him an affectionate look and flicked his ear lightly with my tail. "I will."

Jayfeather gave a satisfied nod, then turned his head sharply over his shoulder. "Snowstorm, you there? You can stop hiding now."

I held back another *mrrow* of laughter as I immediately heard Snowstorm let out a long sigh of relief, her white fur catching a glimmer of moonlight as she stepped into view. "Thank StarClan," she mewed, looking frazzled but still managing a sheepish grin. "I was walking so slowly that I think a turtle would have beaten me in a race."

I sniffed, flicking my tail in mock secrecy. "Don't tell Swiftflight," I teased before beckoning her forward with a flick of my tail. "Come join us. We're almost there."

Snowstorm's eyes widened in mild panic. "We are?" she squeaked, shaking her head as if bracing herself. "Oh, dear."

I flashed the she-cat a reassuring look before turning my attention back to the path ahead. Recognition washed over me as I took in our surroundings. The trees were beginning to part in front of me, the grass beneath my paws felt softer, and the path that we were on seemed worn from how many cats had padded on it before. Along with that, the air grew cooler, crisp and refreshing, brushing through my fur like a whisper from StarClan.

And sure enough, just after a few more moments of traveling, the brilliant Moonpool came into view – bright, glittering blue water that looked like thousands of melted crystals. The rocks that surrounded it seemed to sparkle as the water reflected off of them.

For a rare moment, I was silent, simply staring at the breathtaking

sight. I let out a soft sigh as I gazed around, utterly captivated by the Moonpool's brilliance. "Wow," I murmured, my voice tinged with awe. *If any cat doubted StarClan's existence, I feel like they'd be reassured just by seeing this place.*

Turning my head, I looked back at Snowstorm and Jayfeather, their pelts glinting faintly in the moonlight. "Snowstorm, this is your first time here, right?" I began, flicking my tail toward the glistening pool. "What do you think?"

Snowstorm stared, her blue eyes wide as if she were trying to absorb every detail. For a moment, she looked entirely at a loss for words before finally speaking. "It's... wonderful," she whispered, her voice soft with awe. She turned to Jayfeather, blinking as though she could hardly believe it. "I can't believe you and the other medicine cats get to come here every half-moon!"

Jayfeather let out a dry, unimpressed huff. "Oh, yes. Such a joy," he replied sarcastically, shaking his head. He flicked his tail toward the Moonpool and cleared his throat. "Well, as much as I'd love to sit here and admire the Moonpool and whimper over how it's the most beautiful thing on earth, we should probably get started."

Snowstorm blinked, her expression shifting from awe to concern. "Get started? What does that mean?" she asked, her voice tinged with nervousness.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "I forgot that you've never done this before!"

I nodded to the she-cat, flicking my tail toward the water. "You basically just shove your nose in the water and then go to sleep."

Jayfeather groaned audibly. "Goldenshine, Great StarClan," he muttered before turning to Snowstorm. "Put more properly, you lightly touch your nose to the water and then lie down next to the pool. You should fall asleep within just a few moments."

Snowstorm gave a small nod of understanding but then turned to me, amusement sparking in her eyes. "Thank you," she meowed, taking a deep breath before nodding to me, humor in her gaze. "I'd maybe appreciate your explanation..."

She then gave a sniff as she began to lower her head towards the water. "...if I was a three-moon-old kit."

I then rolled my eyes as I heard Jayfeather let out a snort. I then proceeded to dip my own nose into the water. I couldn't help but slightly cringe at how freaking *cold* the water was, especially despite the warmth everywhere else with the Greenleaf season.

However, this was only my second time doing this – would I ever get used to this? Probably not.

Next to me, Jayfeather was doing the same, getting straight to business by touching his nose to the water and immediately lying down and closing his blind blue eyes. I then glanced to my other side, where Snowstorm was also already lying down, except her eyes were screwed shut and she seemed to be shifting uncomfortably.

I brushed my tail lightly along her shoulder. "There's nothing to be scared of," I murmured gently.

Snowstorm took a shaky breath, her eyes still closed. "I know," she whispered. "This is just very new... and strange."

I tilted my head, a playful glint in my eyes. "But you're used to that, right?" I told her, my voice full of pride and a bit of teasing. "This is *nothing* compared to what you've done already."

She paused, considering my words, before letting out a deeper breath that seemed to steady her. "You're right," she finally said, her voice firmer as she readjusted herself to lie down more comfortably. "Let's do this."

"Let's do this," I echoed silently, turning back to the pool. A flicker of anticipation rose in my chest. *I can't wait to see you, Snowflight.*

Within just a few heartbeats, I felt myself seemingly disappearing from the world around me, my surroundings only being fully black for a moment before little sparkling flecks – they looked like stars – began to appear around me. That was then followed by the cold stone floor below me turning into soft grass, the outlines of trees

beginning to form around me and reflect into the Moonpool, and a bright night sky forming above me.

As I stood up, I saw movement on both sides of me and realized that Snowstorm and Jayfeather were both still beside me. They both clearly had beamed into StarClan at the same time I had and were also getting back up onto their paws. I only took a quick glance at Jayfeather before excitedly looking over at Snowstorm, whose blue eyes were wide with amazement as she looked around, clearly trying to take in absolutely everything as our surroundings fully turned into the familiar StarClan forest.

"Pretty cool, huh?" I asked the younger she-cat.

Snowstorm didn't even look back at me, clearly entranced by everything around her. "'Pretty cool' doesn't even begin to cover it," Snowstorm breathed. She then sat down, her tail curling neatly around her paws. "Sure, I'd be sad if we didn't get to see Snowflight, but I'd be happy just to get a glimpse of this place and then go home."

Jayfeather snorted, his ears twitching. "I'd beg to differ."

I sniffed in amusement and turned to Jayfeather. "Well, of course you do. You're in love," I meowed, flicking my tail towards him. "And you're also here all the time,"

Snowstorm let out a dreamy sigh, her eyes shining. "Gosh, Jayfeather. You're so lucky."

Jayfeather only gave a small twitch of his whiskers. "Sure am."

I nodded at him, agreeing with Snowstorm. "I'd say I think you are too," I added, my gaze drifting over our shimmering surroundings.

I then took my own time to look at my surroundings, unable to help feeling emotional each time I was there. I was always, *always* brought back to the night I had been brought to StarClan for the first time—the night after Snowflight had died.

Snowflight had managed to visit me, Lilypetal, Thornclaw, and Jayfeather—the four cats she had loved most—to give us a final

goodbye. I hadn't realized it at the time, but it had been Snowflight's final goodbye before her spirit made its way into Snowstorm. It had meant so much to me, and surely to everyone else, to see her looking so healthy, happy, and beautiful after experiencing such a tragic death. When things had felt so unbearably dark, like they could never be good again.

Now, being able to see her in StarClan after all the closure that I and the rest of the family had been able to experience managed to mean even more. *So much more.*

"Snowflight!" Jayfeather's voice jolted me out of my thoughts.

I then let out a sigh of relief, my heart completely filling up with so much love and gratitude as I then looked straight ahead to see the glowing, beautiful white pelt of Snowflight. *And this is why.*

With an excited squeal, I sprang forward, my paws barely touching the ground. "Sorry, you guys! I get to smother her first!" I called over my shoulder.

Snowflight purred warmly as I barreled into her, digging my muzzle into her neck and burying myself in her familiar scent. "Hi, Snowflight!" I meowed, my voice muffled against her fur.

"Goldenshine!" she squealed almost in the exact same way I had. "It is *so* good to see you!"

I pulled away, mock-offended. "Well, geez, I would hope so!"

She rolled her eyes, a playful huff escaping her as she lightly bopped me on the nose with her paw. "Great StarClan," she muttered with exaggerated exasperation.

Then her pale blue eyes softened, and her demeanor shifted, growing shy as Jayfeather padded up to her. Her purr deepened, and I watched as he touched his muzzle to hers and gave her a few gentle licks on the cheek.

"Hi there," she murmured, her voice warm and tender.

"Hi, yourself," Jayfeather replied softly, the rare affection in his tone

making me glance away for a moment to give them their space.

Or, so they wouldn't see me trying not to vomit.

Just kidding. They were very sweet. But it was still weird to me.

Snowflight leaned forward, her nose brushing his ear. "I've missed you so, so much," she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion.

I cleared my throat loudly, breaking the moment with a pointed flick of my tail. Snowflight let out a purr, nodding at me as she added, "Both of you."

Her gaze suddenly lit up as it landed on Snowstorm. "However," she said, her voice bright with excitement, "I'd say I probably missed you most of all!"

She bounded over to Snowstorm, touching her nose to hers in greeting. "Snowstorm, what are you doing here?"

Snowstorm's eyes glowed as she met Snowflight's touch, her awe more than clear. "Well," Snowstorm began, her voice shaky but earnest, "if it wasn't too weird for you, I wanted to come and more formally meet you." She paused, shifting her paws nervously as she shrugged. "I mean, you were literally a part of *me* and who I was—who I *am*. So..." She trailed off, shyly looking up at my sister. "Hopefully that's okay?"

Snowflight blinked at her, her expression softening into something almost bewildered. "Okay?" she echoed, sniffing as if the thought of it not being okay was absurd. "Of course it's okay! I guess I kind of get to more formally meet you too!"

I watched the two of them, my gaze flicking back and forth as I tried to process what I was seeing. Snowstorm was right—this was incredibly trippy. These two had been one and the same for so long. Snowflight had practically taken over Snowstorm when she fought Ashfur and killed him. To see them now, side by side as separate cats, was so strange, but so wonderful at the same time. *It shows me that Snowstorm and Snowflight were two separate cats, for one, but...*

My gaze drifted to Jayfeather, who was now looking at me with

clear, sighted blue eyes. His expression was filled with quiet satisfaction, his certainty radiating like the stars above us. *...But it also shows me that Jayfeather and I completed our mission that we had worked to accomplish for so long.*

Despite the amazingness of it all, all I managed to say out loud was-

"Gosh, this is weird," I muttered, my eyes flicking back and forth between Snowflight and Snowstorm.

Snowflight purred, her fluffy white tail curling around her paws. "How do you think I feel? I'm looking at the cat that used to *be* me!"

"Me too!" Snowstorm chimed in, her voice full of amusement.

"Oh, that did not help," I deadpanned.

Snowflight swatted her tail dismissively. "Oh, well then, forget that!" She turned to Jayfeather, wrapping her tail around his back and pulling him closer to her own flank. "How have you all been? How is Clan life?"

Jayfeather snorted. "As good as things can be a moon after the Dark Forest battle, I suppose," the medicine cat told his love. "The medicine den is finally starting to calm down after treating some of the longer-healing wounds from the battle."

"Hm," I meowed mockingly, flicking my tail. "You're lucky that you've had my help collecting herbs during all of that chaos."

Snowflight quirked an eyebrow at me, her eyes narrowed. "Question —why didn't you help with herbs when I was in the medicine den?"

I rolled my eyes dramatically. "For a lot of the time you were there, I was either trying to get over the fact that you were there, or I was..." I trailed off, flicking my ears in in discomfort, "...being stupid."

Snowflight gave me a knowing look, her eyebrow arching even higher. "The stupid that brought you Swiftflight?" she asked slyly.

"Exactly," I admitted with a sigh. Thinking for a moment, I added,

"Hm... life has been pretty good in the Clans since we last saw each other!"

I then let out a small grunt, hesitating for only the smallest moment if I should disclose the next part. "Except... well, believe it or not, *stupid* may or may not be rearing his ugly head again."

Snowflight's eyes widened, her tail tip twitching. "What? What do you mean?"

I hesitated, glancing over at Snowstorm. She probably didn't want to hear about this particular kind of drama – and like Jayfeather had mentioned earlier, I wasn't sure if I was ready for her to know all of this Breezepelt lore. *She thinks pretty highly of me, and I'd hate for that to change...* "Oh, don't worry," I said quickly, waving my tail like I was shooing away her concerns. "It's honestly close to nothing."

"Yet," Jayfeather interjected.

"Jayfeather!" I hissed, brushing my tail across his face to shut him up. Turning back to Snowflight, I added, "I'll give you more updates the next time I see you."

Snowflight's ears flicked, and her gaze was light, but her pale blue eyes glinted with concern. "Okay, if you're sure!" she meowed. After a moment though, her eyes then scanned me up and down. "*Are* you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," I replied with a firm nod, hoping to StarClan that she'd drop it. "*Stupid* is behaving himself."

"For now," Jayfeather then muttered.

I shot him a glare, silently willing him to stop feeding into the thoughts already swirling in my head. As Snowflight purred and nuzzled Jayfeather's neck, I decided to deflect. "So, Snowstorm," I meowed, my tone exaggeratedly enthusiastic, "tell Snowflight about what's going on with you!"

Snowstorm purred, her eyes brightening. "Hm, well, things are pretty good for me too! Not to bring it back to earlier, but..." She

nodded toward Snowflight, her expression turning thoughtful. "Coming out of fulfilling a destiny like yours has definitely taken me a bit to process."

"That is completely understandable," Snowflight purred warmly, her tail curling over her paws.

"And I was telling Jayfeather and Goldenshine earlier how confused I still am about it all," Snowstorm continued, her voice soft. "I mean, I grew up with your soul within mine. Yet, you've left me now, and I don't feel any different?"

Snowflight's gaze softened, and she nodded. "And that is exactly what was supposed to happen," she explained gently. "Yes, you grew up with my soul as part of yours, and in a way, we were one and the same, but we also aren't one cat – we never were."

She then gestured toward Snowstorm with her paw. "As you can see. I mean, you're fully *you*, Snowstorm. You and I are completely separate entities now. Fully experience all of the wonderful things life has to offer as yourself." She winked mischievously. "There are definitely some exciting things coming your way."

Snowstorm blinked, seeming to process her words. "Wow... that's pretty cool," she murmured before looking at Snowflight with wide, urgent eyes. "I mean, it was wonderful to have your soul within mine, but... I guess it's neat to fully be able to go on as myself too."

"I'd say it's pretty neat," Jayfeather snorted, flicking his ear.

"Jayfeather and I probably can sleep a little more easily at night," I then quipped.

I then flicked my ears as a single flash of light seemed to encapsulate everything in my vision.

Snowflight's ears also flicked, her expression shifting. "Uh, oh," she murmured. "Speaking of..."

"Or *not* speaking of..." I muttered, squinting at Jayfeather as another flash flared. "Are we waking up already?"

Jayfeather sighed, leaning over to give Snowflight a lick on the head in farewell, I assumed. "I think so," he meowed reluctantly. Then, he turned to glare at me. "We did leave a hair later than I would have liked."

"Oh, whatever!" I shot back, swatting at him with my tail before bounding up to Snowflight. Twining my tail with hers for a moment, I touched my nose to hers. "Bye, Snowflight! We'll see you soon!"

Snowflight tightened her grip on my tail, her pale blue eyes glowing with emotion. "Absolutely. *Please*." She paused, her gaze sharpening as she fixed me with a stern, urging look. "You better give me details on what you were telling me earlier."

I sniffed, trying to hide how much her concern tugged at my heart, and gave her a nod. "Oh, I will," I promised. Taking a deep breath as the world around me began to fade to black. *If there are any details to give. And I hope to StarClan that there won't be.*

Chapter 8

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I was jerked awake as violently as a pebble being yanked away from the water crashing at the shore. My heart was racing and pounding in my ears as I looked around. I had no idea what time of day it was until I looked at the warriors den entrance, and I was basically *blinded* by the bright sun as its rays leaked into my bramble shelter.

But even despite not being able to see anything else for a moment, something still managed to linger in my vision.

Those stupid, haunting blue eyes. Full of nothing but malice.

I then let out an exasperated huff, letting my head rest on my paws as I shifted in my nest and tried to breathe through yet another nightmare. *Geez, these are really going to happen almost every night, huh?* I thought to myself in frustration. *Great StarClan, how does Ashfur manage to mess with me after all of this time?*

I then forced myself to take a deep breath as my anger began to rise, and as the images of those blue eyes... the sinister sneer... and all of those shadows of pure *evil* threatened to fill my head once again. *For. StarClan's. Sake. Go. Away,* I forcibly told... my nightmares, I guess? *You're all of the past. Stop.*

I then flicked my ears, managing to be pulled back to reality even more as I heard and felt stirring next to me. I turned my head, my annoyances and worries seeming to dissipate for a moment as my eyes fell on the ginger tabby pelt of Cherryfall, who was still asleep next to me. *Well, I don't think for much longer,* I then thought affectionately.

I tried to hold back a purr, my eyes probably gleaming like an idiot as I then watched her slowly blink open her big ginger eyes.

Eventually, they stayed open, the first thing her gaze falling on being my own eyes staring down at her as she let out a contented sigh and then lifted her head to touch her muzzle to mine. "Good morning," she then purred softly to me.

I closed my eyes for a moment, taking in her sweet scent. "Good morning," I replied to her before then giving my mate a lick on the cheek.

But I then pulled back, surprised as I noticed that Cherryfall's eyes now seemed to be dark with concern. "Are you alright?" she asked me, her voice still a bit adorably groggy from the morning. "I thought I felt you wake up suddenly next to me."

I let out a sigh, my tail flicking with a restless frustration that seemed to cling to my fur like burrs. "Yes... I'm alright. I'm just..." I then shrugged, giving Cherryfall a knowing look, "shaken, I guess."

Her amber eyes widened with concern, and she ran her tail gently along my flank. "You had another nightmare, Swiftflight?" she asked worriedly.

I let out another huff, overwhelmed by a wave of frustration that bubbled up from somewhere deep inside me. "Mmhm," I mumbled as I lowered my head back down to my paws

Cherryfall sighed, her head beginning to shake slowly. "Ugh, I hate that," she muttered, her tone sharper now, the genuine annoyance clear in her voice. "You're having them almost every night."

"My thoughts exactly," I grumbled.

She frowned, her whiskers twitching as she regarded me with a mixture of worry and frustration. I hated seeing her this way – as any cat would expect, she didn't get angry often. However, her anger on my behalf made my chest ache in a way that felt... nice? "Goodness. Are you sure you're okay?" she then pressed to me.

I drew in a long breath, lifting my head so I could meet her gaze. "I promise that I am, Cherryfall."

Her eyes widened further, glowing faintly as they locked onto mine.

"Really, really promise?" she pressed, her tone almost playful, though the worry lingered there.

A purr rumbled in my throat despite myself. "I really, really promise," I meowed softly to her, leaning forward to touch my nose to her head.

But when I pulled away, my gaze fell to my paws, where I was periodically sheathing and unsheathing my claws. "It's just frustrating, I suppose. But, I mean..." I hesitated, glancing back up at Cherryfall, reluctant and worried that she was still going to want to leave me when I reminded her of that part of me I'd rather forget.

But nevertheless, I pushed on. "I trained with Ashfur in the Dark Forest... for many moons. From when I was a three-moon-old kit to a new warrior." I paused to take another breath, feeling the weight of my words as I spoke them aloud. "It's going to take a while for him to truly leave me."

As I should have expected, Cherryfall didn't bat an eye. Instead, she blinked at me with a kind, steady gaze and twinned her tail with mine. "That completely makes sense," she meowed to me warmly, shaking her head slowly. "But... I don't like it."

I tightened my grip on her tail, drawing strength from her unyielding support. "I don't either, but..." I then drew in another deep breath as I tightened my grip on Cherryfall's tail. "I'll get through it."

My mate nodded firmly. "I know you will," she said in the most kind, reassuring voice, her eyes glittering with a mixture of love and concern that made my chest feel impossibly warm. "But is there anything I can do to help? At all?"

A purr escaped me before I could stop it, and I leaned forward to give her cheek a gentle lick before nuzzling it. "Just you and your presence is enough. *Trust* me," I murmured, my voice low and earnest. *I feel like I could get through anything with you by my side.*

Cherryfall nodded in understanding, almost as if she could hear the part that I'd been too nervous to say out loud. "Okay," she meowed

softly. She let out a small breath, and then a purr rumbled in her throat as I sighed again, leaning my head against her shoulder. She wrapped her tail around my back, stroking it soothingly. "Despite the nightmare, did you get enough sleep last night?" she then asked me.

I let out a huff of relief. "Thank StarClan, I think I did?" I meowed. *A rarity these days.*

My ears then flicked as I glanced toward the den's entrance. "We both slept in a bit, didn't we?"

"Oh, not by very much. Don't worry!" Cherryfall replied quickly, her voice light with reassurance. "Thornclaw just left the den a bit ago."

"Then we aren't very behind the patrols being put together."

"Exactly," she meowed, though she let out a reluctant sigh. "But I suppose we might need to get up and make sure we're out there and accounted for."

I sighed, not at all wanting to leave the comfort of her presence. "I guess," I murmured, snuggling up even more to my mate and digging my muzzle into her shoulder fur. "But... just one more moment? This is really nice."

Her purr, soft and so sweet, made my heart swell. "Awww," she meowed to me, stroking my head with her tail. "You're so cute."

I closed my eyes, taking in her scent one last time before reluctantly pulling away. "Takes cute to know cute," I teased with a small purr. Taking a deep breath, I then straightened myself and pushed to my paws. "Alright, I guess I'm ready now."

I then purred, my heart managing to swell even more as Cherryfall then let out one of her exhilarated, spirited huffs, clearly ready to take on the day as she practically leapt up onto her paws. "Okay, let's go!" We exchanged one last loving look before beginning to pad out of the den together, her tail brushing mine. "What plans do you have for the day?" she then asked me.

I furrowed my eyebrows as I thought of my answer. "Hm... good

question," I murmured. "I was maybe going to check and see if—"

I then cut myself off, stepping back and blinking in surprise as I nearly ran into a flash of black. "Whoa!"

I then stepped back, shielding Cherryfall with my tail for a moment before realizing that the cat in front of me was just Lightningstrike, his yellow eyes wide and apologetic. "Sorry, Swiftflight! I didn't mean to scare you," he meowed kindly, though there was some laughter in his voice.

I let out a slow breath, forcing my fur to lie flat again. "All good," I replied. *Great StarClan, if his eyes happened to be blue, I probably would have not meant to slash him across the face...*

Lightningstrike flashed me another apologetic look before continuing. "Lilypetal sent me to get you! She said she got a late start organizing the patrols today, so I offered to help her out."

I tilted my head, curious. "Oh, yeah?" I asked, though a flicker of worry crossed my mind. *Why did she have a late start?* I wondered. *Was she having trouble sleeping too?*

I then blinked as a thought crossed my mind. *Clearly she's having trouble getting rid of Ashfur like I am. Is she having nightmares too?*

Shaking the thought away, I refocused on Lilypetal's son in front of me. "What does she want me to do?"

"Believe it or not, Bramblestar told her to send you and Snowstorm to pay a visit to WindClan," he then seemed to watch as my eyes widened. "Isn't that neat? Apparently he wants you two to ask them about that weird stoat situation they're dealing with."

Uh, oh.

I blinked, still stunned. "WindClan?" I echoed, exchanging a glance with Cherryfall. Her knowing and worried gaze told me she understood my surprise and worry. I then looked back at Lightningstrike. "Really?"

Lightningstrike nodded eagerly back at me, clearly noticing my

surprise but, of course, not knowing the full story. "I know! But I guess he wants us to get a gauge of the situation and see if we need to interfere."

I took a moment to process, then sighed. "A very ThunderClanny move," I muttered, earning a giggle from Cherryfall. "Do I need to grab Snowstorm?"

"Nope!" Lightningstrike replied, shaking his head. "I already talked to her before I came to find you. She said to let you know she's finishing up her mouse and will meet you at the camp entrance."

I gave a single sharp nod, trying to push down my reluctance that threatened to keep me in my spot. "Great." I nodded before turning to Cherryfall. "I guess I'd better go and meet her then, wherever she is." *Whether she's chowing down or waiting patiently at the entrance...*

I then leaned forward and pressed my nose to Cherryfall's, purring softly. "I'll see you later."

Cherryfall's eyes glittered as she looked back at me. "Sounds like a plan," she whispered to me. "I love you."

I then flicked my ears as her eyes seemed to flash with urgency for a moment. "And good luck," she then whispered even more quietly.

I couldn't help but just stare gratefully back at her for a moment. Cherryfall, of course, knew all about my... *connection* to WindClan, as well as all of the latest happenings with me and... *WindClan*, so her luck and concern was appreciated. "I love you too," I murmured as I gave her an almost reluctant, yet amused look. "And thank you."

I then gave her one last affectionate flick on the ear with my tail before quickly padding out of the warriors den, a flicker of unease still stirring in my chest, but I pushed it down.

Turning back to Lightningstrike, I gave him an appreciative nod. "Thanks for letting me know about this, Lightningstrike," I then meowed to him.

He gave me a single sharp nod in return. "Sure thing!"

Lightningstrike purred. I then narrowed my eyes, slowing my pace as I quickly realized that the black tom with white paws was following me.

But before I could even question it, Lightingstrike stopped for a moment and let out a purr. "Oh! I just figured I'd come with you and send you two off."

I let out a sniff, my eyes continuing to narrow. "Send us off?"

After I questioned him, I noticed the tom become a bit shy, his paws shuffling back and forth as he looked down at them. "Well, yeah!" he then meowed. "In case you a-and Snowstorm have any questions about your quest or something."

My narrowed gaze still remained. "O...okay," I replied, before letting my gaze sweep the clearing, quickly spotting Snowstorm already waiting by the camp entrance, giving herself a quick grooming.

She then paused as soon as her blue eyes fell on me and Lightningstrike, and she gave me a flick on the ear with her tail as soon as we both met her at the entrance. "Hey there, rabbit-breath," Snowstorm greeted as I approached.

To be honest, at those words, I had to keep myself from cringing. Now was *not* the time to be calling me that.

I then watched as her gaze shifted past me, and she nodded to Lightningstrike. "And long time, no see to you!" she added, her voice welcoming and kind.

"Oh, I'm sure. He said he wanted to..." I began to Snowstorm, glancing over my shoulder at Lightningstrike.

As I had expected, his eyes were gleaming... and on Snowstorm.

I then looked back at my best friend, finding that I trying to keep a mischievous smirk from emerging on my face. "...send us off," I then finished.

Snowstorm purred, her gaze flicking between me and Lightningstrike. "Going above and beyond with his assignment, I

see," she teased.

Lightningstrike looked down shyly for a moment. "I try..." he murmured. He then gave a quick shake of his head, looking back up at the two of us. "Did you all have any more questions about your... a-assignment?"

Unfortunately for me, it's as clear as day. "I'm good."

I then once again looked mischievously back at the white she-cat next to me. "Snowstorm?"

She thought for a moment before shaking her head. "I think I'm all good too! Go to WindClan, and try to ask Onestar about the stoat problem without our fur getting shredded off."

She then gave me a light nudge, then proceeding to nod towards the camp entrance tunnel and trot towards it. "Let's go, Swiftflight! And thank you, Lightningstrike!"

I fell into step behind her as she padded away, but not before turning to give Lightningstrike a grateful nod. "Yeah, thanks, Lightningstrike. We should be back closer to dusk."

As I glanced back at the tom, I quickly realized that he was looking past me, his yellow eyes shining before he gave a shake of his head and gave me a nod in return. "Great! I'll let Lilypetal know," he meowed to me. He then gave me a lash of his tail, beginning to pad deeper into camp. "See you later, Swiftflight!"

I watched the tom go for just a moment, I have to admit, still trying to hide a smirk, before quickly turning around and following Snowstorm into the forest. I immediately ran up to walk beside her, and Great *StarClan* was I tempted to tease her and ask her about that encounter with Lightningstrike. *I mean, it wasn't just me, right? Sending us off? Come on.*

But I quickly pushed away those thoughts. For now, at least. And luckily for Snowstorm, she began speaking to me before I could even begin to form words. "So, off to WindClan, I guess?" Snowstorm meowed as she gave me a nudge. "Your favorite place to

go, right?"

I let out a groan, rolling my eyes so hard it almost hurt. "Oh, yeah. Never been so enthused," I muttered sarcastically.

Her eyebrows furrowed as concern flickered across her face. "But seriously though, is this okay with you?" she asked, rising with worry. "I could have someone else come with me if you're uncomfortable."

I sighed, shaking my head slowly. "I should be fine," I replied, though I wasn't entirely sure if I was trying to convince her or myself.

"You sure?" she pressed, her gaze searching mine. "I know that things are a bit weird... *there*."

I let out a snort. "Weird is definitely a word for it," I admitted. I then let out a sigh, actually relieved that I was getting an opportunity to let out all the emotions I'd felt as soon as Lightningstrike had uttered the word "WindClan" to me. "I mean, going there isn't my favorite thing, to say the least. I'd prefer not to come face to face with my father, who as of just a few quarter moons ago was a loyal Dark Forest cat. Who as of a few quarter moons ago would've killed my mother if he had the opportunity."

I then let out another sniff. "And who as of a few *days* ago was trying to speak to me and Goldenshine."

"Ew, that's right," Snowstorm muttered with a grimace. "That's so uncomfortable." I sniffed again, appreciating her reaction even as the unease gnawed at me. "What are you going to do if he tries to talk to you?" she then asked.

I snorted, shrugging as I cast a glance toward the horizon. "Who knows."

I then shut my eyes for a moment, letting out another sigh as I decided to withhold some information from Snowstorm – that was something I rarely did these days, but for now, I figured it would be in my best interest. I mean, I don't think she would be fond of

knowing that I actually wasn't sure how I would handle seeing Breezepelt. After what Goldenshine had shared with me after the Gathering, I had been worried, angry, and concerned, sure. But I still couldn't get past the fact that he had tried to talk to us at all. Why?

I mean, seriously, I then thought. *What if something after the Dark Forest battle, or... something* I *said really got to him?*

I then gave a quick shake of my head, as if to get rid of those thoughts as much as I could. *Swiftflight, what are you saying? You said it yourself – Breezepelt was a Dark Forest ally. He tried to hurt Goldenshine* and *Dustystorm. There's no giving him the benefit of the doubt.*

But just a moment after thinking that, I couldn't help but blink in realization. *But that's what cats would have said about me right after I left the Dark Forest...*

I then pulled myself out of those thoughts too, my head already way too full for my liking. "Can we change the subject while we still have the time to?"

Snowstorm immediately nodded, her blue eyes glowing with understanding as she gave me a comforting touch on the shoulder with her tail. "Of course."

I let out a relieved, yet exasperated huff, reciprocating the same touch on her shoulder with my tail. "Thanks."

And with that, the two of us proceeded on through the ThunderClan forest, the scent of rabbit and the breeze of the moors feeling closer as Snowstorm told me about her trip to the Moonpool she had taken last night with Goldenshine and Jayfeather. She excitedly told me about how she had gotten to meet Snow*flight* for the first time – something I hadn't even realized that she hadn't done.

But as I hoped it would be for her, she said that it had been absolutely surreal and magical getting to see the she-cat that she once had basically *shared* her life with. She also told me that Snowflight had told her that they were now two completely

separate entities.

"That's really neat," I meowed as Snowstorm and I crossed the stream marking the border between ThunderClan and RiverClan. Water dripped from my paws as I gave my fur a shake, then turned to her with a thoughtful look. "And I guess hearing it from Snowflight herself makes it true."

I paused, narrowing my eyes back at Snowstorm as a realization hit me. "Wait... so does that mean we're essentially not kin anymore? You're not my mother's sister?"

Snowstorm flicked her ears and blinked in surprise, as if the thought had never crossed her mind. "Wow... I guess not. That's so crazy!" she exclaimed, her voice tinged with amazement.

I then found myself having to hold back a smirk again. "And... you aren't technically siblings with... like, Lightningstrike?"

"Not at all!" she replied, turning her gaze toward me. Then her eyes narrowed slightly, and her tone shifted. "Why the curiosity about Lightningstrike specifically?"

I blinked, giving my friend a casual shrug. "Well, we just saw him, right? Guess he's on the brain," I said, hoping my voice sounded as nonchalant as I wanted it to.

"Sure," Snowstorm meowed, her narrowed eyes lingering on me for another heartbeat before she looked ahead and flicked her tail. "Hey, this is just outside WindClan's camp, isn't it?"

I couldn't help but blink in surprise, bewildered that we were already here. But Snowstorm was right. I had never been here before, but from what cats had told me, this was the beginnings of the shallow scoop in the ground that WindClan used as their camp. *Here we go.*

I then took a deep breath. "Looks like it," I muttered before beginning to pad ahead, beckoning with my tail for Snowstorm to follow. *Time to check with Onestar, and, as Snowstorm said, hope that he doesn't shred our fur off,* I thought to myself.

I then felt my stomach become heavy with dread. *And attempt to avoid Breezepelt at all costs*, I told myself.

I then forced myself to take another deep breath as Snowstorm and I began to crawl through WindClan's camp entrance. *Calm down, Swiftflight. He may be out on patrol, and you won't even have to deal with him.*

Pushing back my nervous thoughts, I tried to appear unphased and confident as Snowstorm and I then made our way out of the entrance, where we were now in sight of the entirely of the open WindClan camp. As I had expected, several gazes fell on the two of us at once. Snowstorm and I immediately exchanged a glance, not even sure what to do, who to talk to, or who we could even approach to ask if Onestar was around.

But we would figure that out within a few heartbeats, hopefully. At this moment, I was just relieved to see that Breezepelt seemed to be nowhere in sight. *Thank StarClan.*

And the lesser problem of mine – and Snowstorm's – was solved when I then noticed two WindClan cats quickly padding towards us. I quickly recognized one of them to be brown and white pelt of Harespring – WindClan's new deputy after they had lost Ashfoot in the Dark Forest battle. And I was pretty sure that the dark tabby tom next to him was Leaftail – a tom who I was pretty sure was just about the same age as Snowstorm and me.

While Leaftail looked pretty hostile, thankfully, Harespring's gaze was calm as he padded up to meet us. "Hello," he meowed calmly and evenly to the two of us. "You two are from ThunderClan, right?"

Before Snowstorm or me could do as much as nod, I flicked my ears in surprise as I heard Leaftail let out a hiss. "Why are you asking them, Harespring? Of course they are!" he growled, his fur beginning to bristle as his gaze darted between Snowstorm and me. His eyes burned with suspicion. "Why are you two here? Is this an ambush?"

Harespring rolled his eyes in response, a gesture that amused me more than it should have. "Calm down," he said, his voice

exasperated.

"Calm *down*?" Leaftail spat, his tail lashing furiously. "They're probably here to spring on us while those stupid stoats are bringing us down!"

Snowstorm and I exchanged an amused glance. Harespring, however, remained composed, his tone light with sarcasm. "Very interesting theory," he meowed dryly before flicking his tail toward the apprentices' den. "If that's the case, I'll take care of it. In the meantime, how about you check on your apprentice? Give him the time of day instead of these ThunderClan cats."

Leaftail hesitated, his gaze darting between us and Harespring. Finally, he let out a contemptuous hiss. "Fine," he muttered, spinning around to stalk off. But before he left, he threw a final glare over his shoulder. "Behave yourselves."

Harespring watched him go, his expression unreadable at first, but then he turned back to us with an apologetic look in his eyes. "Sorry about that," he said with a sigh. "How can I help you two?"

I exchanged a pleased glance with Snowstorm. Harespring was surprisingly calm and compliant—refreshing, in fact, compared to Leaftail's theatrics. "Well, we were hoping to speak with Onestar?"

Snowstorm flicked her gaze in the direction Leaftail had stormed off, her tail twitching slightly. "Leaftail said it first, but we are here regarding the stoats," my friend explained. "We didn't know if he had a moment to speak about it with us? We were sent by Bramblestar."

Harespring seemed to think this over for a moment, his eyes darkening slightly. "Hm... he is here, but..." He paused, his voice trailing as if debating how much to say. "I do wonder how he will take this."

I sniffed. "Us too."

"But I suppose you all can try," the WindClan deputy then concluded, flicking his tail to motion us forward. He began leading

us through the heart of WindClan camp, and I followed close behind, guessing where Onestar's den might be as we walked. "I have to admit," Harespring added, his tone low but thoughtful, "I've wanted to potentially ask the other Clans for help with the stoats. But as you would expect, Onestar doesn't want to do that if at all possible."

I gave a sniff. *Sounds about right.* I very well knew of and had heard about Onestar's track record when it came to receiving help from other Clans, and I knew as soon as Lightningstrike asked us that this was going to be a bit of a fight between us and the WindClan leader. *And oh, how am I looking forward to it...* I then thought sarcastically.

I then raised my eyebrows, realizing that we had arrived when Harespring stopped in front of a large tangle of gorse bushes. "He's just in here," the WindClan deputy told us, giving a flick of his tail. "I can come in with you all, if you'd like."

Once again, I exchanged a glance with Snowstorm, this time, it was one of immense relief. "That would be great. Thanks," I told the white and brown tom as the three of us then began to pad towards the den. "We-"

"Harespring!"

I flicked my ears, surprised by the sudden voice that came from behind us. But I followed the WindClan deputy's gaze, turning around to see who had addressed him.

And when I did, I was certain that both my heart and stomach dropped down to the ground.

There was no mistaking the sleek black pelt and the amber eyes of Breezepelt as he seemed to urgently run up to the three of us.

And although he had called Harespring's name, his gaze was set right on me. *Oh my StarClan.*

And when he arrived to where the three of us were, I was practically frozen, having no idea how to act as he gave his deputy

a nod. "Would I possibly be able to speak to Swiftflight for a moment?"

Swiftflight? What a name for you to be uttering right now.

I pretty much stayed frozen, except for my eyes widening a bit. I could just barely notice Snowstorm padding up to flank me.

I waited anxiously to hear Harespring's answer. The WindClan deputy narrowed his blue eyes. "What business do you have with a ThunderClan cat, Breezepelt?"

I couldn't help but flick my ears at those words. *That seemed oddly pointed.*

But I quickly pushed that away, my *world* practically frozen as I then shifted my gaze towards Breezepelt, who I could not *believe* was actually here, and who I could not *believe* had made my worst fear come true. *He wants to speak with me? Why? Why is he so determined?*

I was surprised by how nonchalantly Breezepelt shrugged back at Harespring. "Oh, we spoke one time at a Gathering."

I guess that's not a lie, unfortunately.

"And I was just hoping to catch up with him, while he was here," Breezepelt then went on. "I just need him for a few moments, that is..."

A chill then ran down my spine as Breezepelt shifted his gaze away from Harespring, his amber eyes now looking deep into my blue-gray ones. "...if he is willing."

Willing? I echoed in my mind. *Am I?*

I had absolutely no idea how to respond. If it was just the two of us, it maybe would have been a little easier for me to turn the tom down, but in front of WindClan's deputy, it would give some strange implications if I said no...

But at the same time... how would it look to *Snowstorm* if I said yes?

We literally had just talked about all of the terrible things that Breezepelt had done, and why taking the time to speak with him under any circumstances was out of the question. *And it should be out of the question. I think it should be out of the question, and Goldenshine thinks that it should be out of the question. So... why then...*

I then looked at Snowstorm, my head beginning to shake slowly in helplessness. *Why then am I so curious to see what he wants despite* all *of that?*

As I met Snowstorm's gaze, her blue eyes were fully of understanding. As always, she seemed to have a complete read on what I was thinking. "I can talk to Onestar," she then whispered to me. "Go with Breezepelt, if you want to."

My eyes widened back at my best friend. "But, Snowstorm, I don't even know if I want-" I then cut myself off, looking down at my paws for a moment, trying to avoid Breezepelt's gaze which practically burned into my own fur. *Snowstorm is telling me that I can...* I told myself. *But... what will Goldenshine think?*

After another moment, not wanting to make any of the three cats with me wait another moment as I tried to get my thoughts together, I finally took a large, shaky deep breath. *I guess... it's worth seeing what he has to say, right?*

Now feeling the most overwhelming mix of dread, guilt, and curiosity as I then gave Snowstorm a worried look. "Are... are you sure that you're okay with speaking to Onestar by yourself?"

Snowstorm gave a shrug. "Harespring will be with me. I'll be fine," she reassured me. She then gave the most subtle nod towards Breezepelt. "Be careful."

I only gave Snowstorm a dreaded, wary look in response before turning back to Breezepelt. My stomach seemed to twist when I met his gaze again. And then, it practically felt hollow as I forced myself to give the tom a nod. "That's fine," I finally replied to the black tom, trying to make my voice sound as clear and confident as possible.

With those words, Breezepelt's eyes seem to flash with surprise and... content? "Great," he muttered to me, his eyes then searching as he continued to look at me, bringing me to only shift uncomfortably.

Just when I thought I couldn't stand it any longer, he finally turned around, beckoning me to follow him with his tail. "Follow me."

I looked back at Snowstorm for a moment, watching as her and Harespring began to crawl into Onestar's den. "You be careful too!" I whispered to her before forcing myself to follow Breezepelt across camp.

My heart was pounding like it never had before.

I had no idea what to expect from this. Weirdly, in a way, I was filled with just as much uncertainty and dread as I ever did when I went to sleep as an apprentice, awaiting my Dark Forest training with Ashfur. *What in the heck was Breezepelt going to say to me? Why was he so adamant?*

I then gave a shake of my head. *Stop asking yourself that, Swiftflight. You're about to find out.*

I then forced myself to take another deep breath as Breezepelt and I arrived at what looked like a small clearing at the edge of camp. It was a bit secluded from the rest of the moor, and was surrounded by some more gorse bushes. My stomach now felt as if it were in several knots as I watched Breezepelt sit down. I simply stood in front of awkwardly for a moment, having no idea what to do until he gestured for me to also sit down with his tail.

So, I did so, having to keep myself from letting out a frustrated huff. *Swiftflight, you are demonstrating to your father that you are a weird, draft cat that doesn't know how to act...*

I then gave a small shake of my head. *But why should it matter what he thinks of me?*

I then simply waited, giving Breezepelt the most curt of nods as I encouraged him to speak. *I don't need to do anything.* He *asked for*

this.

I simply watched as Breezepelt himself then seemed to have to take a deep breath. "Hi, Swiftflight," he then meowed simply.

I gave a flick of my ears. It was so strange hearing my name come out of those jaws. "Hi," I meowed, shifting uncomfortably on my paws. His sudden approach already had me on edge, and I couldn't stop myself from asking, "What did you need? Snowstorm and I won't be here for long."

Breezepelt let out a frustrated huff and gave his head a shake. "I don't even know where to start," he admitted, hesitating before hissing softly under his breath.

I simply watched. I likely appeared stoic, but in reality, my heart was pounding in my ears. *Great StarClan, is this what it's like to talk to me when I have a heavy conversation?* I thought in amazement. I was blown away by just how similar Breezepelt's mannerisms seemed to be to my own. *Well, it makes sense...*

Breezepelt's voice broke through my thoughts. "Well... I've been wanting to speak with you... *and* Goldenshine... for a while now," he meowed, his tone faltering slightly. "I'm not sure if you could tell that I've been trying, but... I'm glad I have you now."

"Okay," I replied, still trying to push down the anticipation I was feeling, though my voice luckily appeared cold.

Breezepelt's eyes then seemed to flash for a moment. I seriously couldn't help but wonder if he was noticing how similarly we act. "Well," he continued, his voice quieter now, "as you can imagine, a lot has happened to me in the last moon or so."

"Sure."

"I... fought with the Dark Forest," Breezepelt confessed, his gaze momentarily dropping to the ground before flicking back up to meet mine. "The Dark Forest lost, and... I..." He paused, letting out another huff as if the words themselves were hard to form. "After that, I really began to rethink what I've done... the way I've acted,

and..."

He then let out another hiss, but then took a deep breath. "...I've realized that I need to change."

No way.

I flicked my ears at the tom. *Change?* I repeated to myself. *He... he wants to change?*

I hadn't wanted to admit it before to *anybody*, but that word alone was something I had always hoped would come out of his mouth.

Breezepelt then looked down at his paws. "I know that it's going to take... a lot, but... I know that I need to now." He sighed heavily and began to shake his head. "WindClan doesn't trust me, and I can't imagine that the other Clans trust me very much, but... I'm trying to mend everything. Relationships with my Clanmates, my friends, and..."

He lifted his head then, and his gaze met mine. Another chill ran down my spine as I found myself staring into his deep, unreadable eyes. "...my family," he finished, his voice steady but carrying a weight that sent my thoughts spinning.

My eyes widened slightly at his words, but I remained silent and allowed him to continue. "I know there's only so much we can do, considering we're in different Clans," Breezepelt continued. "But... after how I was, I want to patch up the regrets in my life that I chose to ignore while I was in the Dark Forest."

The regrets that... I brought to your attention during the battle...

I felt frozen again, unable to look away or break the moment.

"I want to have a relationship with you," Breezepelt admitted, his voice cracking slightly. "I mean... you... you are my son." He paused, glancing off into the distance as if searching for words that wouldn't come. "And... while our days together are long past, I want to mend things with Goldenshine too."

I wondered then if I could see desperation or genuine pleading in

his eyes. The thought left me unsettled, unsure of what to feel. Breezepelt's gaze returned to mine, and he added quietly, "I don't know how you feel about that, but... if you're willing... or want to pass on the message."

I don't know how I feel about that either.

I felt just as frozen, and the world around me also felt just as frozen. I had no idea how to take this. It was a *lot*, to say the least.

I mean, Breezepelt had just told me that he wants a relationship with me. With his *son*.

And with that, I couldn't help but truly wonder if my words that I had shared with him during the Dark Forest battle – about how it wasn't too late to change, to become a better cat, and that he could right his wrongs – had actually resonated with him. I couldn't help but wonder if I was part of the reason he had come to do this. To try and talk to me, and to tell me he wanted to speak with Goldenshine too to try and fix things. Great StarClan, how I wanted to take his word for it.

But at the same time, I wasn't sure if I could, and that thought filled me up with as much dread and guilt as I had felt *before* I'd spoken with him.

And as much as I had wanted to hear these words from him *verbatim*, the fact that he thought he could say anything like this to me *so* soon after everything had done made my heart feel hollow.

I had literally just witnessed this same time fighting in the Dark Forest battle *against* his Clanmates and family like nothing else mattered. He had nearly killed his half-brother, Lionblaze, before his father Crowfeather pulled him away. In WindClan that same night, he tried to kill Dustystorm. Just a little before that, he tried to kill Goldenshine in the tunnels.

And sure, he had said everything that he could – he was wrong and wanted to change, but...

How in the name of StarClan could I trust that?

I couldn't even tell if he was being truly apologetic – his amber eyes hardly gave away *anything*.

I wanted to take his word for it more than anything, but I didn't think that I could. *It's just... it's too good to be true... and the fact that I'm saying that about my father already speaks volumes.*

And among all of that, for whatever reason, Breezepelt speaking Goldenshine's name seemed to make my whole body rush with anger, and my fur began to bristle with protectiveness. *He tried to kill her once*, I told myself once again. *That's not easy to forgive. And Goldenshine told me just how manipulative and unpredictable he's been in the past*

I cannot trust him. Not now.

And coming to that realization finally drove me to speak. "I... I-I'm not sure, Breezepelt," I finally forced out, finding that I was not able to meet his gaze. Instead, I looked down at my paws. "I'm sorry, but-"

I then cut myself off, giving a quick shake of my head. *You're not sorry. This is what you need to do.*

I then forced myself to go on. "I don't think I'm comfortable with that."

My stomach twisted as Breezepelt blinked, his dark eyes unreadable. "Ah..." he murmured, his voice trailing off.

"I just..." I hesitated, then forced myself to speak. "I don't know if I can trust you. At all. And to be honest..." I took a deep breath and met his gaze, still as impenetrable as ever. "I don't think I want you around my mother."

Breezepelt narrowed his eyes, his expression hardening. "Hm," he muttered. "Are you speaking for her now?"

I then found myself having to hold back a hiss. "I wouldn't if I didn't already know that she *also* said that she wanted to avoid you at all costs!"

I then forced myself to take a deep breath. "And considering that," I pressed on, "I don't see why I'd benefit from being around you either." *I can't.*

For a fleeting moment, I thought I caught a flash of hurt in the WindClan tom's eyes, but it was quickly overshadowed by a hiss as he stood up abruptly.

I tried to ignore the pang of unease in my chest. "Really? That's what you want?" he muttered to me sharply.

I straightened and gave a firm nod, even though the weight of my decision pressed down on me. "Yes. That is what I want," I said, my voice as steady as I could make it. *What choice do I have?*

Breezepelt stared at me, his fur bristling as his gaze bore into mine. The tension between us crackled like lightning, but then he let out another hiss and turned away. "Fine," he snapped, his voice laced with frustration. "But..."

"But what?" I demanded, my tone edged with irritation.

He let out yet another hiss, his tail lashing behind him. "But you don't think I...?" His voice faltered as if he was struggling to find the right words. Then, to my surprise, his voice rose. "Forget it! You've said what you said."

I narrowed my eyes at him, standing up to match his defiant stance. "Yes, I did. And everything I said stands."

"Thank you," he spat, his voice dripping with bitterness. "I wasn't sure yet."

I held his gaze for a moment, my claws curling into the dirt beneath me. Breezepelt let out another hiss and flicked his tail towards the rest of the camp. "Well, what are you waiting for?" he barked.

"What am I waiting for?" I echoed, taken aback by his growing angry tone.

"You heard me!" he hissed. "Why are you still standing there?"

"What do you mean? You're the one that brought me back here!" I snapped, my frustration finally bubbling to the surface.

"Yes, I did!" he retorted, his voice sharp as a thorn. "Big mistake, clearly."

I let out another hiss, hardly being able to fathom what I was hearing. "*Mistake?*" I repeated, my tone hard.

"Exactly!" Breezepelt's voice rose, venom dripping from every word. "There's no use in talking anymore. Get out of my sight!"

I blinked, the coldness of his words cutting through me like ice. *Now that's the Breezepelt I know,* I thought bitterly. "Done!" I shot back, spinning on my paws and storming off without another glance.

I then whipped myself around, feeling as if I was in flames as I then burst out of that clearing and deeper into WindClan camp, not even sure where I'd be going or if Snowstorm was even done speaking with Onestar and Harespring yet.

But thank StarClan, her white pelt caught my eye immediately, where she was waiting right next to the camp entrance.

Her eyes widened as I basically stomped up to her, my fur bristled out and my teeth bared. "Swiftflight! There you are!" she meowed after sighing with relief, her voice frantic and her eyes now wide with desperation and concern. "How did it go?"

I tried to hold back the growl that was rising in my throat to no avail. "It was just as frustrating and disappointing as I would ever expect it to be," I hissed to my best friend. I then forced myself to sit down, my claws unsheathed and sinking into the ground as I then nodded to her. "What did Onestar say about the stoats?"

Snowstorm's eyes widened. She was clearly shocked that I had changed the subject so quickly. "Oh! Well... it was a bit of a battle at first, of course, but after a bit, he agreed that the stoat problem is getting bad. He would be willing to let ThunderClan send a patrol to help fight them off."

"Really? Fantastic," I meowed tautly to Snowstorm. I then practically whipped myself around, already beginning to make my way back through WindClan's camp entrance. "Let's go tell Bramblestar then."

I heard Snowstorm let out an exasperated gasp behind me. "But Swiftflight, what happened with-"

I abruptly stopped in my tracks for a moment, sharply looking over my shoulder to give Snowstorm a warning look. "That is the last thing I want to discuss right now," I hissed to her, admittedly, in a harsher tone than I would have liked.

But I couldn't bring myself to apologize in that moment, and I simply turned back around and continued to lead her away from WindClan – determined to leave that camp and everything that had happened there far behind me. "You said Onestar is allowing us to help, so let's finish our mission and tell Bramblestar that."

And as angry as I was as I stomped through their territory, I actually managed to feel the smallest bit of satisfaction.

I'd talked to Breezepelt and had found out everything I needed to know. That mouse-brain had tried to convince me that he had changed. But clearly, he was just as unpredictable and untrustworthy as he was before.

Why I had gotten my hopes up at all... I wasn't sure in the slightest.

Chapter 9

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Well, as I had figured we would, ThunderClan was going to help WindClan fight off the stoats.

And as I had worried he would, Bramblestar told me to lead the patrol.

I had just returned from leading a hunting patrol when the ThunderClan leader told me the news. Swiftflight and Snowstorm had just returned from the WindClan trip I had sent them on and were giving Bramblestar their report. Although Onestar had apparently been very stubborn (shocker) he had actually given in and wanted our help getting the stoats out of their territory.

As a matter of fact, ThunderClan and WindClan had met at the border between our territories the next day to brainstorm a plan. It was fairly simple – both Clans would block up all the tunnel entrances where the stoats had made their camp, leaving one entrance open on WindClan's side. Two cats - Breezepelt and Crowfeather – would enter the tunnels to lure the stoats out. From there, a ThunderClan patrol and a WindClan patrol would be waiting, and we would pounce and hopefully get them out once and for all.

Bramblestar had asked me to lead the ThunderClan patrol, and my legs were already shaking.

Don't get me wrong, it was my utmost honor to do this of course, but *gosh*, was the weight of this assignment already jabbing at my heart and making it race. Sure, I had led one of the patrols that *fought* WindClan back in the tunnels, but something about this felt scarier – another Clan would be involved and affected if I messed this up.

But what is there to mess up? I told myself as I led my patrol out for the mission out of camp. *Just follow what we discussed with WindClan, and once we're fighting the stoats, only so much of what happens is in your control.*

I then found myself holding back a frustrated hiss as I gave my head a shake. *That is, if you can stay awake long enough to see what happens.* I then let out a snort to myself me and my patrol made our way into the forest. *Can WindClan and ThunderClan get together again to fight off my Ashfur nightmares?*

I then slowly began to shake my head in exasperation. *I dealt with Ashfur himself for so long... why are lingering dreams about him keeping me up so much?*

I then closed my eyes for a moment, reminding myself of what cats like Swiftflight and Thornclaw had told me. *It's* because *I dealt with him for so long, for StarClan's sake...* I told myself. *But when does it end?*

I then gave another shake of my head, staring at the bright sun above to force myself to be more awake, before taking a deep breath and turning around to make sure that all of my patrol was still accounted for.

I narrowed my eyes as I scanned my gaze over the gathered cats. "Everyone okay?" I then called out. "Everyone here?"

I then had to keep myself from giving the hardest eye roll as I almost instantly heard a very familiar voice let out an obnoxious sigh. "Um, *yes?*" Spiderleg's groan seemed to echo through the trees. "You're checking on us like we just had to walk through a section of the Dark Forest."

I shot a glare at the black and brown tom, pushing down my irritation and worry. *Dang... leave it to Spiderleg to make myself feel* great *about my performance.*

As I only could have expected, I looked over to Thornclaw to see that he seemed to be holding back a growl, his pale blue eyes full of anger as he looked back at his Clanmate. "Put a mouse in it,

Spiderleg."

"I doubt you'd even bother looking over your shoulder if you were leading a patrol through the Dark Forest," I then heard Goldenshine put in.

My eyes then widened for a moment. "StarClan forbid absolutely *any* of that happening..." I then muttered half to myself. "Anyway..."

I then scanned my eyes over the patrol again, and luckily everyone – Thornclaw, Lionblaze, Goldenshine, Mousewhisker, Birchfall, Blossomfall, and... *Spiderleg* – was accounted for. *Good.*

I then gave a nod towards Spiderleg as I finished off my sentence. "Just making sure no one was stuck in their silly, bitter thoughts and possibly wandered off." I then heard some snickers, and I then exchanged a glance with Thornclaw, who was flashing me a proud, mischievous look. *Great StarClan, I love you.*

I managed to let out a light, satisfied sigh as I then turned around, facing the forest once again. "Alright, let's go."

My steps now a little lighter, I continued to lead the ThunderClan patrol through the forest, the sun bright and hopeful as if it had no idea that we were about to fight a bunch of white, wriggly, furry snakes.

Which, it guess it didn't.

We were now deep into our forest territory, the stream only a little ways away when I noticed movement beside me. For a moment, my heart seemed to stop and I had to hold back a yelp when I then noticed the figure by me – for some reason, my mind not being able to comprehend it as one cat, and one cat only. *He would have loved to sneak up on me like that.*

But I gave a quick shake of my head, followed by a sigh of relief when I then quickly recognized the golden brown tabby pelt of my daughter beside me. *Thank StarClan.* I then held back a snort. *What, thank StarClan that you're a complete loon?*

But I quickly pushed that thought away. *Stop it.* "Goldenshine!" I

exclaimed through another sigh of relief. "Gosh, I think you would have scared me *less* if you had run up to me yowling and slashing at everything in your sight!"

My oldest daughter let out a purr of amusement, her gray eyes apologetic. "Sorry!" she meowed to me. "I almost didn't even realize that I was walking up to you... I was so deep in thought and I just found my way up here."

I let out a snort and then gave Goldenshine a lick on her head. "Good. I love to see that your subconscious always leads you right back to your mother." After my daughter gave a roll of her eyes and I gave her a teasing nudge, I found my eyes slowly narrowing. "You're deep in thought, huh?"

I then gave the golden brown tabby she-cat a curious, yet knowing look. "What things could you possibly have to be deep in thought about as we head towards WindClan?" I then meowed sarcastically.

"Oh, yeah. Exactly," Goldenshine replied just as sarcastically, giving a roll of her eyes.

"But in all seriousness, are you okay?" I then asked my daughter, my voice softening as I began to imagine all of the things that were probably going through her head. "Is fighting with... *WindClan* going to ruffle your fur too much?"

Goldenshine let out a snort. "I'll be fine."

"Are you sure? I could-"

"No, mother. *Trust* me, I am glad you put me on this patrol," the golden brown she-cat insisted to me. "You wouldn't be sparing me by leaving me at camp when there's a battle to be fought."

"Oh, I know," I then sniffed with amusement. But I still couldn't help but feel a bit of a regretful tug at selecting Goldenshine for this battle, especially after all she had told me about what had been going on with her and Breezepelt. His glances at her at the Gathering had clearly gotten to her enough, but when Swiftflight had told her all Breezepelt had said to him while he was in

WindClan – him apparently wanting to make amends with his son and his former mate - it all clearly had gotten deep into her fur. *And it's slowly sinking into mine as well...*

But it wasn't like I was sending her to have a one on one chat with the black WindClan cat. She would just be assisting with a mission where he happened to be one of the many cats there. *And she'll just be focused on helping get the stoats out,* I then told myself, trying to bring myself more into *deputy* mode as opposed to *mother* mode. *She'll be fine.*

I then heard Goldenshine let out a small sigh beside me, and something told me she was telling herself the same thing. "I *do* think you'd be sparing Swiftflight though, I have to admit," the she-cat then muttered to me as she let out a sniff. "the poor furball has been in a huff ever since he got back to WindClan."

I then found myself stroking my tail comfortingly along Goldenshine's shoulder as I noticed her seem to hold back a hiss. "I can't *believe* that idiot put all of that on my son. Who does he think he is?" she then began to growl. She then gave a quick shake of her head and fur. "Alright, I have plenty of time to be angry about this later."

She then let out a huff. "Well, actually, I'll use the anger to my advantage. Shred a stoat to pieces if I need to."

I let out a snort and gave my daughter another affectionate nudge. "That's my Goldenshine," I purred to her, my heart swelling with love and relief as I noticed the now determined gleam in her eyes.

She then let out an amused sniff. "But hey, keep doing those patrol check-ins if you want to," my daughter then joked. "It gives me more time to get my bearings."

"Oh! Speaking of..." I murmured, exchanging a humored glance with Goldenshine before I then glanced over my shoulder, having to hold back a *mrrow* of laughter as I called back to the patrol behind us. "Everyone back there?"

Spiderleg's hiss managed to be heard over the eruption of purrs.

"Oh, for StarClan's sake!"

I then finally let out the purr I had been holding back, my heart actually feeling light as we were nearing the edge of ThunderClan's territory.

And as I slowly thought about what that meant, my heart sank a bit, and my steps seemed a bit heavier again.

We had arrived to our planned meeting spot that we'd coordinated with WindClan – the stream that marked the ThunderClan and WindClan border.

The pre-battle excitement and fun was over. Now, I had to lead this group into a battle with stoats in order to keep WindClan safe.

Not to mention, this would be the first time I would be representing ThunderClan as their deputy for something like this.

I let out a shaky sigh, looking over my shoulder – looking for and luckily immediately meeting the gaze of Thornclaw, who had been multitasking in talking with Birchfall and glaring at Spiderleg as we had walked through the forest. My mate's pale blue eyes were full of pride and reassurance as he looked back at me. My heart then managed to feel light for another moment as he seemed to mouth to me, "I believe in you."

That gave me enough to turn around and make a leap across the WindClan stream into their territory. And I tried to hold on to that smallest bit of pride as I then watched the rest of my patrol make their way across.

I was having to take several deep breaths as I did so. *Goldenshine said she was going to use her anger to her advantage...* I told myself. *Can I use the smallest bit of pride, fatigue, and nerves to my advantage?*

I then took one last deep breath as I then began to lead the patrol towards the WindClan patrol I could see off in the distance, waiting. *There's a first time for everything*, I then said to myself. *Let's do this.*

~>~>~>~>~

I wasn't sure if Crowfeather and Breezepelt had decided to pause for a lovely chat before making their expedition into the stoat tunnels, but either way, they were taking their sweet time.

Or, at least, it sure felt that way.

Our ThunderClan patrol found Onestar's WindClan patrol just a little beyond the stream. The WindClan leader had behaved bitterly and coldly, of course, but he also demonstrated something that could have been seen as gratitude to a cat that looked really hard.

After we had gone over the plan one more time, our two patrols had dispersed, standing on either side of the tunnel entrance, waiting for Breezepelt and Crowfeather to rile up the stoats and chase them out so that we could have a piece of them.

Goldenshine, who was sitting right next to me, had her dark gray eyes fixated on the tunnel entrance that the tails of Crowfeather and Breezepelt had disappeared into just earlier. Her gaze was dark, her eyelids narrow, and her tail seemed to be anxiously twitching behind her. I had my tail draped across her shoulders for comfort, but I was almost positive that she didn't even notice.

I hated seeing her like this. *Really* hated it, and I had to push down my regret of selecting her for my patrol all over again.

But I knew she was like this simply because she'd had to see Breezepelt. Just as I and she had probably worried he would, his amber eyes had fallen on her as soon as our ThunderClan patrol had come into sight. I don't think my daughter ever even looked in his general direction, but just being in the WindClan's tom's presence seemed to be enough for her. *And after all that he has done to her, and especially after what he tried to do with Swiftflight and what he said to him, I don't blame her one bit.*

I tightened my tail's grip around Goldenshine's shoulders, hoping that that would somewhat pull her back down to reality. "Hey, Goldenshine?"

My daughter blinked, giving a quick shake of her head before meeting my gaze. "Hm?"

"As much as I love to see you deep in thinking in that pretty head of yours, I might have to ask you to snap out of it a little bit," I teased the golden brown she-cat. "Just so that you don't come to and realize a stoat just dove into your face."

To my relief, Goldenshine let out a sniff at my words. "Much obliged," she then muttered. "Sorry."

I blinked in surprise back at her. "My goodness, there's no need to be sorry! I just want to make sure your face doesn't get ripped off before you even realize what's going on!"

Goldenshine then rolled her eyes, but they gleamed with humor. "If my face is getting ripped off, yes, I would love to be conscious while that's happening."

"Excuse me?"

Goldenshine and I both whipped our heads around, and I purred with amusement as I saw the identical golden brown tabby pelt of Thornclaw padding up to the two of us. He briefly nuzzled his daughter's head with his tail as he stared at me with amused, yet concerned pale blue eyes. "Are you telling our daughter that her face is getting ripped off?"

I purred with amusement, shaking my head and giving my mate a shrug. "I mean, the chances are low, but never zero."

Goldenshine jokingly gawked at me, exchanging a humored, surprise glance with Thornclaw. "Comforting!" she then meowed to me, laughter in her voice.

"Well, now that you're actually on alert and prepared for it to happen, you should be comforted!" I purred back to Goldenshine. I then nodded to Thornclaw, whose eyes were still wide. "She wasn't exactly *alert* just a few moments ago." I then gave a small gesture towards the tunnel with my tail.

Thornclaw's gaze shifted and immediately seemed to darken. "Mmhm..." he then murmured, his gaze now falling on where I'd flicked my tail. He then shifted his gaze back to Goldenshine,

concern wiping over his blue eyes once again. "Well, understandably so."

When Goldenshine simply let out a grunt, Thornclaw and I both exchanged a worried glance. We then both proceeded to sit on either side of our daughter. "Are you sure you're okay, Goldenshine?" I then asked her gently.

The golden brown she-cat then gave a roll of her eyes. "I am absolutely fine. I promise."

"*Promise*, promise?" Thornclaw then pressed lightheartedly, causing Goldenshine to sniff and roll her eyes once again.

"I... *promise*, promise," Goldenshine then muttered. "It's..." The two of us then simply watched as she took a deep breath, hesitating to find the right words. "It's just all... *weird*. After everything that he's done, all of the evil that he's shown, and now he's still here in WindClan helping them get rid of these stoats... acting like a normal cat... trying to make amends with me and my son..."

A small chill then seemed to run down her spine. "It's all so weird. I don't know how I should even feel or what to believe. And aside from all of that..." My daughter then let out a sigh, shutting her eyes as she gave a slow shake of her head. "I hate that I'm nervous for him right now. Being down there in that tunnel with all those stoats."

Goldenshine then flashed an urgent glance towards me, and then Thornclaw. "It's not coming from love or *anything* like that, I promise. *Promise*, promise," she then assured both of us. "I don't even know why I feel any semblance of care towards him at all."

Thornclaw and I exchanged another glance – this time, one of both understanding and warmth, before I comfortingly touched my nose to Goldenshine's ear. "Goldenshine, he is the father of your kit, and while your love for him may be gone, worrying about him isn't strange," I told her. "And when it comes to feeling weird about all of this... I mean... of *course* you do. Please be patient with yourself. There is no rush to sort out your feelings about this."

"Exactly," Thornclaw then chimed in. "And if Breezepelt is making you feel like there is a rush, then... well, *his* face is going to be ripped off."

I then stared affectionately back at Thornclaw, my eyebrows furrowing as I saw my mate then take a glance at his unsheathed claws. "...and it won't be done by a stoat."

Goldenshine let out another small purr of amusement. "Again, comforting," she meowed as she touched nose to her father's shoulder. She then shifted her gaze back and forth between the two of us, her eyes full of gratitude before her dark gray eyes fell to the ground. "I-"

Goldenshine then almost immediately cut herself off, her eyes widening and her ears flicking as a rumbling that seemed as loud as thunder filled the air. "...will finish giving you all my thoughts on another day..." she then finished as she took a pawstep back, the rumbling slowly getting louder. "Goodness, is that the stoats?"

I found myself having to take a deep breath, the reality of this situation hitting me all over again. "I sure hope so, otherwise it looks like we have two different packs of crazy animals on our paws."

I then had to take another deep breath right as I finished speaking, and I urgently and nervously looked over to Thornclaw, who, as usual, looked so full of pride and love as he looked back at me.

Goodness *gracious*, how I wished I could feel the amount of pride that he seemed to have for me, but it was gosh darn hard.

I returned the look, blinking gratefully back at him before turning to face the rest of the ThunderClan patrol – all of which... or *almost* all of which had been waiting patiently behind us. "Alright, everyone!" I called out to the patrol after one last deep breath. "It's sounding like Crowfeather and Breezepelt are leading the stoats out of the tunnel, so it's go time."

I unsheathed my claws and sunk them into the ground, trying to steady myself and keep my legs from shaking as I attempted to

recall everything Onestar had told me about stoats. "From what I've heard about these stoats, they are lithe, fast, and *tricky*. If your attention shifts for half a heartbeat, several will be on you and wrapped around you in an *instant*."

I then began to twitch my tail nervously as the rumbling became almost deafening. "Staying alert and being quick is the key here. If you can do that, they're easy to take down from there."

I then brushed past Goldenshine, flashing her and Thornclaw worried, urging looks before stopping in front of them, facing the tunnel head on.

My heart seemed to be pounding in my ears as my eyes then fell on the black and gray pelts of Breezepelt and Crowfeather bursting out of the tunnel.

And right behind them, seemed to be a wave of white, slithery fluff, and countless stoats that had chased them out of the tunnel. I was surprised that even two WindClan toms could outrun these psychos that practically seemed to be flowing out of the tunnel like they'd been released from a floodgate.

But here they were – Breezepelt and Crowfeather had succeeded in their mission, and now it was our turn to act. "ThunderClan, attack!" I tried to call out as confidently as I could.

I then burst forward, luckily hearing the thundering of the ThunderClan patrol's pawsteps right behind me as I ran into the stoats head on.

I practically had to hold back a yowl of surprise as I almost immediately collided with two large stoats, the two of them seeming to wrap around my flank and slashing at my fur as much as they had the ability to. Their little paws were small, but vicious, and I was already having to bare my teeth and hiss through the pain. Around me, stoats were already beginning to practically *pile* on top of my Clanmates and the WindClan patrol a little ways away.

It only took this much for me to conclude that these little white, slithery, fluffy creatures were absolutely *crazy*.

Trying to act fast, I threw myself onto the ground, basically smashing the two stoats into the earth from where they were still wrapped around my flank. With that, one of them loosened their grip and fell off, but the other had managed to wrap around one of my hind legs, sinking its teeth into it.

I let out a hiss in pain, forcing my head back so that I could reach back at the stoat, grab its belly into my teeth, and toss it to a nearby tree. Luckily, my toss had been hard enough that the stoat *slammed* into the bark, either killing it or knocking it unconscious.

Almost as if some others had been waiting, two new stoats leapt at me as soon as I was free, leading to a very vicious and *annoying* cycle of stoat after stoat after stoat. There were so many coming at me alone that I worried, but almost *hoped* that I was getting the brunt of this mob and the fight would be over soon.

But to my dismay, that was not the case at *all*.

During a few heartbeats that I was given to look around, my heart absolutely sank to see that the mob of stoats seemed to be *endless*, with every single cat appearing to be taking on at least one or two stoats. I could also already see so many flashes of red and could hear so many yowls of pain. *Great StarClan, are we defeated and outnumbered already?*

Just a moment later, I let out a startled yowl when another stoat leapt straight at my shoulder. And as I brought myself to the ground once again, my head was spinning with both panic and worry. *Do I need to send someone on my patrol to grab some more ThunderClan cats?*

I then gave a quick shake of my head as I then stood up, sank my teeth into the stoat's neck and then tossed it away. *Can we even afford to send away even one cat?*

I then whipped myself around, hissing and unsheathing my claws as I just barely caught another stoat storming right at me. *I can't even afford to think about that right now.*

This newest stoat wrapped around my flank once again – one of the

most difficult places it could possibly settle. *Darn you!*

With a determined grunt, I dropped down once again and rolled onto the ground, hopefully disorienting the little creature. I leapt back up onto my paws after it fell off of me, slashing it off to the side before deciding to pelt into the big mob of fighting stoats and cats.

My eyes immediately fell on the brown and black pelt of Spiderleg, who seemed to be muttered curses as he fought with two stoats – one that was latched to one of his front legs, and one that was practically wrapped around his tail.

I pelted forward, leaping straight for the stoat that was gripping onto my Clanmate's tail.

As I slashed at it, I heard Spiderleg let out a protesting hiss beside me. "I don't need your help, Lilypetal!" he barked back at me.

I let out a hiss myself as the stoat on Spiderleg's tail slashed at my nose, and my muzzle began to feel warm with blood. "Clearly, you do, Spiderleg! Stop trying to prove something and *accept* the help!"

Finally getting a moment in between the little slashings, I managed to grab the tail stoat, slash its belly as it dangled from my jaws, and then toss it away. Now that Spiderleg didn't have two stoats to worry about, I watched him as he was able to grab onto the stoat from his leg and give it a large gash along its flank before it attempted to make a run for it.

The tom then looked back at me, his amber eyes glinting with something that was *probably* his own weird form of gratitude. I flicked my tail at him dismissively, giving him a nod, before we both dispersed and jumped right back into the chaos.

And I was surprised to see that now, the large mob of stoats seemed to the dwindling down. Don't get me wrong, there were still *several*, but the fact that I immediately didn't get taken over by one or two showed some progress. *Right?*

And I also couldn't help but feel a wave of pride while I had the

moment to. After all, this was the first "battle" of sorts that ThunderClan had partaken in since the Great Battle. And just to see the strength that we had managed to build back up after that made me want to soar into the sky. *We can do this.*

I then managed to take a deep breath. *I can do this. You're doing okay, Lilypetal.*

However, I then felt my heart sink with fear and dread just a heartbeat later, when my eyes fell on the golden brown tabby pelt of Goldenshine just a couple of fox-lengths away.

My mouth nearly dropped as I realized she was currently wrangling with *three stoats* all by herself. *No!*

Of course, not giving it another thought, I practically flew forward to go help her, knowing that there was absolutely *no way* that Goldenshine could manage that by herself. *No normal, functioning cat could!*

But I practically skidded to a halt just a moment before I planned to dive straight at the stoat that was gnawing on my daughter's hind leg, startled by the flash of black that seemed to fly a mouse-length from my face.

I froze for a moment, my eyes widening with complete shock as I realized that Breezepelt had come to my daughter's rescue, his amber eyes filled with rage as he ripped the stoat away from her hind leg, then immediately went for another one that was biting on her shoulder.

Goldenshine clearly didn't know who had come to her aid at first, but not to my surprise at all, when she looked over her shoulder, her dark gray eyes instantly filled with both bewilderment and anger. "Breezepelt, what do you think you're doing?" she barked at the WindClan cat. "Get away from me!"

Breezepelt let out a grunt, now gripping the stoat on my daughter's shoulder and tossing that one away. "You idiot!" he barked at her. "You think I'm doing that when *three stoats* are about shred you to bits?"

"Since when do you care if I get shred to bits?" Goldenshine hissed with frustration, grabbing the last stoat that was on one of her front legs, tossing it up, slashing it in the air and watching it land limply on the ground before whipping around to face Breezepelt. "*You're* an idiot if you think I'd ever accept help from you!" she growled at the black tom before pelting past him and back into the cluster of fighting.

Breezepelt followed my daughter's pelt for only a moment before looking off, letting out a sigh, and running past me and towards Crowfeather, who was struggling with a single large stoat.

I narrowed my eyes back at the spot where the WindClan tom and Goldenshine had just had their tussle. *Interesting, very interesting. But again...*

I then gave a quick shake of my head. *Can't afford to think about that right now.*

Already hearing the light thumping of another stoat coming from behind me, I whipped myself around as quickly as possible, ready to slash it off to the side and (hopefully) begin to finish off this battle.

But I hate to admit that that was much easier said than done.

And that was because, for the first time in the entirety of this battle, I actually managed to lock eyes with this stoat.

I don't know what it was about that stupid little freak that made my blood go cold. Maybe it was the snarl pulling back over those tiny, needle-like fangs, or the way its wiry little body vibrated with rage.

But mostly, it was its eyes.

Flat. Beady. Blue.

And so, so full of pure, unfiltered hatred.

My heart practically came to a stop. The battle seemed to blur out around me, all sound turning into a dull, ringing hum.

I had seen that look before. Had felt the weight of that malice, had

been the target of that same, deep, consuming rage. I had only seen it in one other place. *In one other cat...*

It wasn't him, obviously. That would have been *insane*. This was just some rabid WindClan pest. But my brain didn't care about logic. It saw those eyes, saw that *rage*, and it was like claws hooked into my spine, dragging me backward through time, right into the cold grip of *him*... and that constant fear that had hung over my head for so many moons...

I didn't even notice that I'd stopped moving, or notice the stoat lurching forward, all rippling muscle and snapping jaws, aiming straight for my throat.

And only StarClan knows what would have happened if hadn't noticed me in my spell.

But, of course, a certain golden brown tabby pelt had likely had one eye on me this entire battle and sprung right to my rescue.

And I think it was my mate's flash of golden fur that *finally* snapped me out of my insane spell. Thornclaw crashed into the stoat with a furious snarl, his claws raking deep, throwing it back before it could reach me. Then he whipped around so fast I barely had time to register the panic in his wide pale blue eyes.

"Lilypetal, what in StarClan's name was that?" His voice was sharp with panic, his tail bristling like he was ready to shake me. "You weren't moving a muscle! Are you hurt? What happened?"

The battle around me fully snapped back into focus like a slap to the face. However, my heart was still racing, and my head still spinning like I'd just stuck it into a tornado for a few heartbeats. "I'm not hurt! I'm okay, I promise," I reassured my mate after giving a quick shake of my head.

I then brushed past my mate, only being able to flash him a look of gratitude as I forced myself to pelt towards the same stoat, which Thornclaw had only managed to just swipe out of the way. "I just froze for a moment!"

"Wha – *froze*?" I heard my mate call out frantically from behind me. "Lily-"

I then let out a determined growl, now easily able to slash at the stoat as it ran at me. "I'm fine!" I insisted to Thornclaw, more sharply this time.

When I managed to look back at my mate for just a moment, his eyes were still wide with worry and panic, but after I flashed him a single look of urgency, he rolled his eyes, seeming to concede, before diving back into the battle.

I watched him worriedly for a moment as he helped Onestar fend off two stoats before I *finally* got to finish what I had started.

I lunged into another stoat that had been making its way towards me, slamming into it, claws sinking deep. It screeched, writhing, but I wrenched away and raked my claws across its muzzle, sending it skidding back. It hissed, blue eyes flashing.

And for the briefest, most maddening moment, I saw *him* again.

My fur bristled, my breath sharpening, but this time, I didn't freeze.

I struck out again, harder, my claws tearing deep. The stoat let out a strangled cry before it bolted, disappearing into the undergrowth.

And after it ran off, I found that I couldn't move once again. My sides heaved. My head still spun.

Great *StarClan*, was I angry.

I was fine. I had been *fine*. So why had my brain dragged me back into the darkness like some cruel joke? Why couldn't I just... let it go? *Let him go...* I then thought. *Great StarClan, what is wrong with me? Why can't I-*

"Hey, thistlefluff – snap out of it!"

I then was brought back down to earth once again, blinking a few times in surprise as I realized that I had... well, one... gotten in my own head two different times now, the one thing I commanded

others *not* to do, and two... I'd managed to do it without getting my fur ripped apart by stoats?

Giving a quick shake of my head, I then looked to my side to see that Spiderleg was now beside me, his tail practically in my face. "Did you just hear Onestar? The battle is over."

I blinked back at my Clanmate in surprise. "It's over? Really?" I asked the tom in genuine bewilderment. "We chased all of the stoats away?"

"All but a few that ran back into the tunnels..." Spiderleg muttered to me, his amber eyes narrowing. "I would think that ThunderClan's deputy would be one of the first to know that."

With those words, I suddenly found that I had to keep myself from giving the tom a light nick on the muzzle. "Oh, hush it, Spiderleg," I hissed to him, violently pushing down my anger all over again before padding past him deeper into the clearing, where cats were already spread everywhere checking their wounds or checking each other's wounds.

And thank StarClan, Jayfeather, Leafpool and Kestrelflight had arrived, and were more than on top of it when it came to getting those wounds checked out. At first glance, it appeared as if many cats in both WindClan and ThunderClan hadn't suffered any serious wounds, with cats from both Clans already gathering in a cluster to head to back to their camps.

However, I then felt my heart seem to skip a beat when Jayfeather practically *ran* past me, clearly in a hurry to get to someone.

And my heart sank to see that the gray tabby was making his way to Goldenshine, who was lying on the ground, several scratches on her flank as she let out shallow pants.

My whole world seemed to blur around me once again. *No!*

I burst straight towards my daughter, my heart pounding in my ears all over again. "Jayfeather!" I practically cried out to the medicine cat. "Will she be okay?"

Before I'd even finished speaking, the tom was already letting out an exasperated hiss. "*Wow*, did you ever think it might be difficult for a medicine cat to do their job when they're being screamed at?"

"Hey, hey!" Goldenshine then snapped at Jayfeather, to my complete relief. And although her tone had been harsh, her eyes were filled with humor. "Not only are you snapping at the ThunderClan deputy, but you're snapping at my *mother*, Jayfeather."

When Jayfeather simply shot her a glare, she stared mischievously back at him as if he could see it. "And StarClan forbid I have a mother that cares if I live or die."

Both of my eyes nearly fell out of their sockets at that comment. "Wait, this is a matter of you living or dying?"

"No," Jayfeather then immediately answered me, his voice much calmer this time as he shot Goldenshine another glare and then nodded in my general direction. "She's fine, Lilypetal. Just worse than some of the others. I'll be with you soon."

"Thank StarClan." I let out a sigh of relief before beginning to pad away, allowing the medicine cat to have his space. And I had to admit, I knew Goldenshine wouldn't want me fretting over her either.

I then slowed in my tracks for a moment as I padded across the clearing, calling back to the medicine cat. "And don't worry about me, Jayfeather. Make sure everyone else is tended to first!"

I then heard Jayfeather let out a snort. "I tend to you when I think it is best!" he called out to me.

"Gosh, you're snappy," I then heard Goldenshine meow.

"Have you *met* me?"

I purred to myself as I padded farther out of the clearing, making sure to stay out of the way as cats were being tended to. *And I suppose I have to make the call on when to start heading back to camp...* I then realized, the thought making my stomach twist. *What if I call it too early? What I call it and I missed an injured cat on the ground?*

I then gave a shake of my head, letting out a huff. One moment at a time, Lilypetal.

I then peered back over my shoulder, not being able to help checking on Goldenshine from a distance. Luckily, my daughter truly did look fine, and appeared that Jayfeather hadn't been lying just to send me away. She was still panting heavily, and her wounds looked nasty, but with Jayfeather getting right on it, she hopefully would be just fine. Thank golly gosh.

As I made my way to the edge of the clearing, I heard a sniff come from my side, and I turned to see Thornclaw, who was sitting near a patch of bushes on the outskirts of the clearing. My heart seemed to lift as my eyes met his, his gaze full of amusement. "Don't worry, Jayfeather sent me away too," my mate then purred to me, causing me to shake my head in amazement. "We both have to worry from a distance."

"Oh, the relief," I sighed sarcastically, purrs seeming to rumble in both of our throats as we padded up to meet each other, digging our muzzles into each other's fur and drinking in each other's scent for a moment before I found myself pulling away, intently observing my mate's wounds. "But I get to worry about *you* from right here," I meowed to Thornclaw, my heartbeat immediately getting faster when I noticed a deep bite on his shoulder. "Are you sure Jayfeather doesn't need to take a look at you right now?"

Thornclaw sighed, giving me a warm, reassuring look as he brushed my cheek with his tail. "I'm completely fine, Lilypetal."

"*Promise*, promise?"

"Yes, I do," my mate chuckled, touching his muzzle to my head. He then pulled away, revealing a gaze full of concern. "Are *you* okay?"

It was a simple, sweet question, but it still filled me up with dread. "In what sense?" I murmured in reply after I let out a long sigh.

I sniffed, shaking my head. "Well, I don't know what kind of state I'd be in if you hadn't saved my tail earlier." I then stiffened as I came to a realization. "Oh my goodness, I didn't even get to thank you."

Thornclaw gave an easy shrug. "That's okay!"

"No, gosh, I should have said it sooner," I went on, frustration bubbling up in my chest. "But everything was happening so fast, and—I was... and I..." I let out an exasperated sigh. "Thank you for doing that, Thornclaw. And..." Another sigh, heavier this time. "I'm sorry."

Thornclaw's ears flicked up in alarm. "Sorry? Why in the name of StarClan are you sorry?"

"For scaring you," I explained to the tom worriedly. "For freezing up like that. For making you have to do that in the first place."

His expression softened immediately, and he shook his head, his tailtip twitching. "Lilypetal," he said, voice firm but gentle, "you don't have to apologize for that. Ever."

I opened my mouth, ready to argue, but he cut me off before I could. "I mean it. We've got each other's backs. Always. That's never something to apologize for."

I exhaled, long and slow, nodding. "I know," I sighed. "But I'm still sorry."

Thornclaw just looked at me warmly, shaking his head. "No need." He hesitated, then his eyes flicked over me. "How badly are you hurt?"

I scoffed. "Oh, I've looked worse."

"Not reassuring," Thornclaw muttered.

"I am fine, really." I lifted a paw to touch the scratch on my muzzle, wincing slightly. "This is going to be a bit of a nuisance, though..."

My mate chuckled, amused. "Oh, it makes you look awesome, I promise." But then, as if something tugged at his thoughts, his face shifted, growing more serious. He looked off for a moment before settling his gaze back on me, wary and worried. "But are you *sure* you're okay? I..." he hesitated slightly. "Are we going to talk about what happened earlier? You don't need to be sorry at all for it, but...

that doesn't mean I can't be worried about it."

Dread overwhelmed me all over again, hating to tell this kind of story to my mate. "Thornclaw, you're going to think I'm crazy."

"Oh, you are," he said, smirking. I shot him an amused but thoroughly annoyed look, and he gave my flank a reassuring brush with his tail. "Kidding. What happened?"

I hesitated, my heart pounding at just the thought of explaining it. But finally, I took a breath. "Great StarClan, I can't even tell you for sure... but..." I trailed off for a moment. "When I locked eyes with that stoat, it just..."

I finally exhaled sharply. "I thought I was seeing *his* eyes, Thornclaw. The way they locked onto me, the way they were just burning with anger—like he hated me. Like he wanted to hurt me just because he could." I let out a sharp breath, shaking my head. "And I froze. Like some helpless little apprentice. Over a stupid *stoat*."

Frustration flared in my chest. My tail lashed once behind me as I turned my gaze to Thornclaw, almost daring him to make sense of it for me. "Tell me—what kind of sane cat sees a bloodthirsty Dark Forest cat in the face of a rodent?"

Thornclaw let out a frustrated sigh, his ears flicking back. "Lilypetal, like I've been telling you, you *are* sane."

I let out a short, dry purr. "Sure doesn't feel like I am."

"You are." His voice was sharper this time, his tail lashing once before he stilled it. "Like me, Goldenshine, and Swiftflight have been telling you - you went through something horrible. This isn't just something you wake up one day and forget."

I huffed, shaking my head. "But I'm ThunderClan's deputy!"

"And?" Thornclaw pressed to me.

"What deputy acts this way? I can't afford to be—"

"Can't afford to be what?" his eyes were burning into me now, his voice tight with something between frustration and concern. "To be affected? To be hurt? You think pushing it down is going to make it go away?"

I bristled. "What else am I supposed to do? Let myself freak out about it?" My claws flexed against the dirt. "I don't have time to be weak."

"*Weak?*" Thornclaw's tail lashed again, his fur puffing slightly. "Lilypetal, listen to yourself! You think struggling with something like this makes you weak? Any cat—*any* cat—would be dealing with the same thing if they went through what you did." His voice softened for just a moment. "Most wouldn't even be *standing* after all that."

I clenched my jaw, staring hard at the ground. My chest was tight, my heart pounding. I didn't want to hear this. I *couldn't* hear this.

Thornclaw sighed, his anger giving way to something gentler. "I just —I don't want you to ignore this, Lilypetal. I don't want you to just pretend it's not there until it... I don't know, eats you alive."

He then took a step closer to me, his gaze pleading. "I think you should take your own advice – be patient with yourself."

I swallowed, my tail curling around my paws. "I'm fine."

"Okay." His voice was quiet now, steady. "It would be okay if you weren't though."

I gave my mate a shrug. "Well, even if I'm not right now, I will be." I then let out a huff and stood up. "I can't let this get to me, as crazy as it's all making me feel."

"Lilypetal..."

"I'll be fine, Thornclaw," I insisted to my mate, touching my muzzle to his briefly before padding out into the clearing, ready to rally up the ThunderClan patrol and lead them back to camp. "*Promise*, promise."

Behind me, I could still feel Thornclaw's gaze burning into my fur, but I forced myself to not look back.

Sure, he was right – clearly, I have been more okay than I am now, and these visions, flashbacks and nightmares were getting to me.

But, I couldn't let them. Or, at least, I couldn't let others see that they were. When I was already questioning my capabilities as deputy and the mistakes I've made, I couldn't throw this on top of it. ThunderClan would think I wasn't equipped in the slightest.

I was *fine*. Or I was *going* to be fine. I had to be.

Chapter 10

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I couldn't help but cringe, barring my teeth and screwing my eyes shut as I seemed to be in the most unbearable pain possible.

Jayfeather's sharp voice then cut through the air like a claw to the ear. "What in the name of StarClan is wrong with you?"

I blinked back at the medicine cat. "What do you mean?"

Jayfeather's blue blind eyes then narrowed down into slits. "I haven't even touched you yet."

"Oh... ha. Whoops." I gave a sheepish grin, though the flick of his tail told me he wasn't amused.

Jayfeather hesitated for a moment, then finally dabbed at the wound on my flank, still causing me to cringe a bit. "I'll make sure to give you a warning if there's ever a bee flying a few fox-lengths away from you—wouldn't want you to start convulsing in pain."

"Shut up." I muttered to the tom as I forced myself to raise my head from the ground. But unfortunately, as I did so, I almost wanted to screw my eyes shut as my gaze landed on a familiar black tom watching from across the clearing. "Hm," I then grunted.

I saw Jayfeather give a flick of his tail out of the corner of my eye. "What's your problem?"

"Oh, just..." I began as I felt my eyebrows furrow. "He's looking over here."

I shifted uncomfortably in my spot – at least, as much as I could with how stiff I felt at the moment. I mean, it wasn't like Breezepelt was staring me down like his life depended on it, but the glances in my direction every so often as his own wounds were looked at by

Kestrelflight, still made me want to shove my head into the ground and yowl at the top of my lungs. *Geez, I know that I stared off into the tunnel you disappeared into and tried to decipher your complexities, but that doesn't mean I asked for this.*

I then felt a small shiver run down my spine. *And I didn't ask for you to help me with those stoats either...* I then thought, my head beginning to shake in amazement and confusion. *After the way he treated me just* days *ago... why would he go out of his way to do that?*

Jayfeather then cut right through my thoughts. "Breezepelt?" he meowed with an amount of expression that surprised me.

"No, the stoat I made friends with during the battle," I hissed to Jayfeather before flicking my tail against the medicine cat's shoulder. "Yes, Breezepelt!"

Jayfeather exhaled sharply. "I apologize for clarifying. There is only so much I can take from 'he.'" His eyes narrowed as if trying to scan the clearing. "Where is he?"

I tilted my head in the direction of the bushes. "He's over in a little clearing next to Kestrelflight."

"I see." Jayfeather seemed to think for a moment before he then asked, "Like, parallel to your head?"

I blinked back at him before cocking a single eyebrow. "Uh... yeah? Just about?"

"Got it."

Before I could process why he'd even asked, I was then shocked as Jayfeather cleared his throat and proceeded to stand in front of my head, completely blocking Breezepelt from my view.

My mouth immediately dropped open. "You did not just put your rear end in Breezepelt's face."

Jayfeather then popped some herbs into his mouth, chewed them up, and then spat them out. "I don't really care about manners right now." He then began spreading the poultice he'd made over my

wound. "There. You know the drill—try not to squirm around a lot like you always do. It needs to dry."

I snorted as I slowly pushed myself up. "Considering I'm not a snake, I think I'll manage."

"Whatever." His tail flicked impatiently. "Is he still looking over here?"

"I'd know if you weren't standing right in my view of him," I replied, my voice full of laughter.

Despite my words, Jayfeather still didn't move, to my amusement.

But just a moment later, a chill then ran down my spine as I once again recalled the weirdness that had just occurred during the stoat battle. I took a deep breath, and then met Jayfeather's blind gaze. "So, you said you wanted to know whenever he did something weird, right?"

Jayfeather's ears pricked. "I may have," he meowed. His eyes then darkened. "What did he do? Did that piece of crowfood try to—"

"No! Quite the opposite, actually. He..." I then hesitated, the absurdity of it hitting me all over again. "I had three stoats tangled around me, and... he helped get two of them off."

Jayfeather's fur bristled. "Wait, he *helped* you?" he then pressed to me, his voice rising. "What in the name of StarClan does he think he's trying to pull?"

I shook my head, exasperated. "I don't know. You said yourself it's not even worth thinking about." My tail flicked as I mulled it over again. "Gosh, I think this somehow is more infuriating than if he'd thrown a *fourth* stoat at me."

Jayfeather gave a shrug. "Fair enough." He then let out a long sigh as his head began to shake. "That'd make things less complicated, for sure."

"And that's exactly it." I groaned, sitting back on my haunches. "Why am I having to debate whether he's scheming or... really

trying to make amends? I mean... Swiftflight said that he said he was. But..."

"That's assuming he even knows what making amends means," Jayfeather commented with a snort.

I sniffed. "That's true." My ears then flattened slightly as I let out another sigh. I then felt that I had to touch my tail to Jayfeather's shoulder. "I hate that I'm even asking this question, but... could you ever see a world where he'd actually feel guilty about everything he's done?"

Jayfeather flicked an ear. "If that's the case, he's a few moons late... and that *still* seems too soon."

I scoffed. "No kidding," I muttered. "And honestly, if this is his way of making himself feel better, I'd rather he just... not."

Jayfeather let out a small grunt, looking back at me with narrowed eyes once again. "*Would* you?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it again. "...Okay, I don't know. Maybe?" I then groaned again, digging my unsheathed claws into the ground as frustration bubbled up inside of me. "Ugh, why is this so complicated? I liked it better when I could just be mad at him."

Jayfeather let out a sniff. "You could always go back to that. I'm more than comfortable there myself."

"Absolutely understandable," I said dryly. "We've both had our share of Breezepelt's insanity."

I then found my gaze shifting as movement caught my eye. "He's moving," I then muttered, only looking briefly to observe that Breezepelt was now leaving Kestrelflight and that clearing.

Jayfeather gave a half-hearted shrug. "Glad to hear he can move his legs."

"Shut up," I meowed tautly. I then allowed myself another quick glance, watching Breezepelt's posture carefully as he walked along the moor. "Good, good. His attention seems to have shifted."

Jayfeather didn't look convinced. "Maybe," he murmured before giving me a nudge. "Or maybe he's just giving you something else to think about."

I groaned dramatically, flopping onto my side. "Fantastic. Just what I need."

"Try not to lose too much sleep over it," I heard Jayfeather meow behind me. "StarClan knows you already look half-dead."

My response was muffled against the ground. "I hate you."

"I know." He flicked my ear. "But anyway, Breezepelt helping you with those stoats could easily have been one of his many ways to manipulate the cats around him and save face," I heard him meow as he padded up to sit by my head. "That could have been the case with Swiftflight as well. It's the only way to keep himself from getting mutilated by everyone here after everything he's done. There's..."

I then heard the medicine cat take a deep breath, not being able to feel a sympathetic pang in my heart as I realized once again that my best friend was also very likely trying to figure out his own feelings about his half-brother. "There's... only so far he'll go to ask for forgiveness before he decides it's not in his blood or heart to do that."

I sniffed, considering his words. "True."

I then forced myself to lift my head from the ground once again. And as I had worried it would, something ahead caught my attention once again, and my ears flicked in surprise.

I immediately narrowed my gray eyes. "Another question," I murmured.

Jayfeather sighed. "Yes?"

"Just how far is he going to go before that happens?"

Jayfeather narrowed his eyes down at me. "Who knows. ...Why?"

I didn't answer immediately. My eyes were locked on Breezepelt, but not because of anything he was doing alone. Across the clearing, he was speaking with the ginger tabby pelt of Lionblaze. My mouth nearly dropped open at the sight. They weren't fighting. They weren't glaring at each other. They were... talking. Civilly. Lionblaze's amber eyes were calm, and then—to my complete and utter bewilderment—he dipped his head to his half-brother.

I exhaled sharply, my tail flicking. "...Well," I muttered, my voice flat with confusion, "let's just say that I think he's already going farther than either of us expected."

~>~>~>~>~

The sun was low in the sky, already working on hiding itself behind the trees but still managing to splash a beautiful, deep orange light into the stone hollow.

It had only been a little while since ThunderClan had returned from WindClan territory. While Jayfeather had managed to take care of every cat in some capacity back at the battle scene, I was still watching him be stretched thin here at camp. Nearly every cat that had fought had seemed to receive at least one wound that was on the way to infection, and that poor medicine cat was having to tend to them like a mother bird to her babies in a nest that were constantly about to fall out of it.

He'd already checked on me a few different times. "Checked" meaning that he'd stomped over to me, sniffed my wound, let out a grunt, and then stomped over to the next cat. I felt so loved.

Luckily, my wounds genuinely weren't bothering me too much, and also, the fact that I now had a thrush in front of me certainly helped.

Oh! Dustystorm was with me as well. I guess that helps out too.

However, I had to admit that I felt a bit off by looking at Dustystorm's face. He was chewing on the sparrow he'd chosen, his eyes narrowed and deep in thought as they stared at his paws.

I mean, I knew *why*. Of course, as soon as I had returned to camp, Dustystorm had run right up to me to check if I was alright and made sure that I grabbed something to eat like the sweetheart and perfect tom that he was. And after he had freaked out about my wounds, I told him everything that had happened with Breezepelt.

His response? Extreme distaste.

"That mouse-brain sure is bold for thinking that he can do that, and that you'd be okay with it," he muttered.

"And don't worry, I wasn't," I replied quickly.

"I *hate* that he's coming after you like this," Dustystorm then meowed, hardly seeming to hear me for a moment. He then let out a snort, his pale blue eyes then falling on me. "And I hate that I almost want to *thank* him for saving you."

I rolled my eyes. "Right?" I then gave a sniff. "Whatever the intention was, I guess he saved my tail either way. Those stoats really had me."

"Absolutely. Um..." I then flicked my ears back at Dustystorm, immediately become intrigued... and worried as I watched him shift for a moment, clearly hesitating to speak. "Whatever the intention was... do you think he..." He trailed off once again. "...he has good intentions in all of this?"

I widened my eyes back at the tom. "What? No!" I meowed instantly before forcing myself to think on it for just a moment. "I mean... I'd be shocked if he did, truthfully."

Dustystorm seemed to shift uncomfortably in his spot once again. "And... if he did? I mean... that was a pretty big move."

"*Move?* Move towards what?" I shot back, already skeptical.

Dustystorm began to shake his head. "I don't know, and I don't want to know," he admitted. He then hesitated before asking, "What would you do if... for some reason... he really did that because he wants to show he cares?"

Trying to push down my own discomfort at seeing my mate's discomfort, I gave the dusty brown tom a cheeky smirk. "Hm... I'd tell him about how awesome my mate Dustystorm is, and that I suggest he doesn't try killing him the next time he's in battle with him."

To my relief, Dustystorm let out a small chuckle. "A great way to respond," he purred as he licked my ear. But after a moment, it was clear that his question lingered. "But seriously... would you ever... let him back into your life? It just... seems like you'd consider it since you're so worried about it all."

My mate's eyes seemed to widen, as if he was worried he'd spoken out of turn. "Understandably so!" he then blurted to me. "I just... wonder."

I felt a weight settle in my chest as his words sank in. It was a question I didn't want to face, and I took a long moment to think about it before I spoke. *I guess it's an important question to ask...* I then told myself. *Allying with the Dark Forest, threatening to kill several cats, and overall just being a jerk is one extreme... but now he's demonstrating so many things that are like... the opposite extreme. How does anyone figure out their opinion of someone like that so easily?*

I couldn't help but close my eyes for a moment, feeling frustrated as the question still felt unanswered and unresolved. "He may have potentially saved my life today, but he also once tried to take it from me," I eventually muttered to my mate. "It's going to take a lot more than what I've seen so far."

Dustystorm nodded, shifting once again as if he was trying to get a pebble off of his back that just wasn't sliding off. "But... do you think it could eventually get to that point?" Dustystorm pressed gently.

I raised my eyebrows back at Dustystorm. "Of true forgiveness?" I clarified before answering. "I don't know... I really don't know." *After today... and after what Swiftflight told me about what Breezepelt said in WindClan... I have no idea what to think*, I thought to myself before letting out a small snort. *Oh, Swiftflight, just wait until you hear about this latest installment.*

Dustystorm then sighed, breaking me out of my thoughts. "Ah... I see." He paused before giving a shake of his head. "Completely understandable."

I felt my heart practically flip upside down, and my stomach seemed to drop as I observed the clear worry and discomfort that Dustystorm was feeling. "Are you okay?" I asked, padding up closer to my mate and trying to search his gaze.

Immediately, the tom looked back up at me, his pale blue gaze warm. "I promise that I am. I guess..." He then took a deep breath. "This is just a lot to digest."

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head. "But anyway... let's get past that. No need to look into it anymore." My stomach still felt hollow with worry as he nodded toward the fresh-kill pile, and a small smirk appeared on his face. "After the two catches we ate, we sure made the fresh-kill pile look small. Do you want to go out for a hunt?"

After those words, I couldn't help but let out a sigh, my worries easing a little. Clearly – the both of us needed a distraction right now. Was Dustystorm fully okay with the Breezepelt situation? I would bet what was left on the fresh-kill pile at least that he was not. *But... I guess that's not something he wants to unpack right now,* I told myself. "I'm always up for a hunt, what do you mean?" I teased to my mate.

As I then excitedly tried to get up, a sharp pain shot through my side, and I winced as hard as I would have if I'd been receiving the wound all over again. Of course, Dustystorm was immediately by my side, his pale blue eyes wide with panic as he supported me. "Great StarClan, what am I thinking?" Dustystorm meowed frantically. "You're injured, and I was trying to drag you out to hunt! Goldenshine, I'm so sorry."

I shook my head quickly. "Gosh, don't be sorry! I'm the one with the injury, and I didn't even think." I then straightened myself up, standing on my own as I touched my muzzle to his cheek in reassurance. "But I'm fine, I promise."

Dustystorm's expression didn't change. "Goldenshine, I've been conditioned to not believe you when you say that."

I gave him an exasperated look. "I promise that I am! Seriously, it just hurt a bit more 'cause I was stiff for a long time." I then gave my mate a determined nod. "Let's go hunting."

"Goldenshine..."

"What? I'm serious!"

"Goldenshine."

I rolled my eyes. "Saying my name over and over doesn't make me any less stubborn."

"Oh, I'm fully aware, but it's always worth a try." Dustystorm smirked and licked my ear. I purred at the affection, but he huffed. "Alright, we can still go hunting. Just take it easy, please?"

I let out a satisfied grunt and gave a flick of my tail. "Can't make any promises."

Dustystorm sighed, but his eyes gleamed with affection as I trotted through the hollow, the last rays of the sun lighting the brambles around us. "Let's go!" I called over my shoulder, my heart already lifted by the prospect of getting away from the confusion and just being with the love of my life.

And as the two of us then walked side by side towards the camp entrance, I flicked my ears in surprise at the flash of black I saw also padding towards the camp entrance – not Breezepelt, thank StarClan, but Nightwing, who also seemed to have plans to leave camp. *Oh my goodness!*

At the sight of her, both Dustystorm and I padded up to her excitedly. "Hey, excuse me? Can I ask you a question?" Dustystorm meowed as he tilted his head, eyes full of exaggerated concern. "Have you seen my sister anywhere? She looks a lot like you, actually."

Nightwing rolled her eyes, but I could see her green eyes slightly

gleaming with humor. "You're hilarious," she muttered.

Dustystorm then gave a shrug, looking amazed. "Well, what can I say? I feel like I haven't seen you in forever!"

"And that makes two of us!" I cut in, stepping forward with a dramatic flick of my tail. "Nightwing, my love, depriving Goldenshine of one of her best friends is a very risky thing to do, I hope you know that."

"I know, I'm sorry!" Nightwing said, ears flicking back. "I've just been really busy."

Dustystorm let out a huff. "Well, Great StarClan, you need a moment to breathe at some point, don't you?" I then purred as I felt the tom wrap his tail around my back. "The next time you have some breathing room, you should hang out with Goldenshine and me."

I then gave a flick of my ears, gasping and trying to hold back an overwhelming amount of excitement. "She *will*, in fact!" I declared enthusiastically. "Nightwing, we're about to go hunting! *Please* come with us!"

"Oh!" Nightwing hesitated, shifting on her paws.

"I mean, you were already heading out into the forest, weren't you?" Dustystorm then asked. "To take one of your walks?"

"Uh, yeah, usually, but... not this time," Nightwing then said quickly, her gaze falling down to her paws. "I mean, I can't hunt with you all."

"Nooooo!" I gasped, dramatically sagging against Dustystorm. "Why not?"

Nightwing hesitated, and Dustystorm and I then exchanged the most discreet glance. "I... Jayfeather asked me to go grab some herbs for him," the black she-cat blurted quickly. "He... he said he needed some extra marigold, and I'm getting it for him."

I squinted at her. "Well, we could come with you, couldn't we?"

Nightwing's ears shot up, and she quickly shook her head. "Oh, that's okay! Anyway..." She hurried past us toward the camp entrance, brushing against my side as she went. "I should hurry up and get on that for him. I'll see you all soon, I promise!"

Beside me, Dustystorm's eyes narrowed as he watched his sister crawl into the camp entrance and into the darkness. "Bye..." he then murmured almost inaudibly.

My mate and I then stood in silence for a long moment, staring at the spot where she'd vanished. "So, that was weird, right?" I finally asked, turning to him.

"Oh, yeah," he said flatly. "I am baffled that she thinks she got away with that."

"Seriously."

Dustystorm exhaled sharply. "...Searching for marigold," he then muttered, shaking his head.

"Oh, come on. We know she's not really doing that, right?" I prompted as I gave a roll of my eyes.

"Right."

I then looked deep into my mate's eyes, and to my complete satisfaction, the gleam of mischief in his own gaze told me everything I needed to know. "...And we're going to confirm by following her, right?"

"Right!"

"Glad we're on the same page," I said, smirking.

Dustystorm straightened up, determination flashing in his pale blue eyes. "Always." He took a deep breath. "Time to find out what my sister is up to."

With a flick of my tail, I nudged him forward. "Let's go bust her sneaky little plan wide open."

We gave her a few moments' head start, then slipped out of camp after her, careful to keep our paw steps light. Nightwing had always been good at moving quietly—she didn't make a sound as she weaved between the trees ahead of us. Along with that, she was jet black and would practically be *invisible* in just a little while.

But thank StarClan, her scent – the only thing we could really rely on - was easy to follow, winding steadily through the forest. The cool night air only carried the crisp scent of damp leaves and pine needles, and aside from the occasional rustle of prey in the undergrowth, everything was quiet.

For a while, we just trailed behind her, staying far enough back to avoid being noticed. *Hopefully*.

But the two of us had only been traveling for what felt like a few heartbeats before Dustystorm abruptly stopped in his tracks, his pale blue eyes narrowed.

He then gave a flick of his ears. "Did you feel that?"

I paused and returned his narrowed gaze. "Feel what?"

"I just thought I felt a raindrop or something," Dustystorm explained, then giving himself a shake of his fur. "StarClan forbid."

"Dito to that!" I purred to the dusty brown tom. "I didn't feel anything."

He hesitated, then shook out his fur. "Huh. Thought I did."

"You silly thing."

We then kept going, pressing deeper into the woods. But a few heartbeats later, my mate paused again, letting out a frustrated huff.

"Okay, that had to be—"

"Nope," I said before he could finish. "You're imagining it."

He gave me a look. "Goldenshine, I swear something just hit my

nose."

I snorted. "Maybe the trees are spitting on you."

He let out an exaggerated sigh, but before I could tease him further, unfortunately...

A drop of something landed on my ear.

I stopped dead in my tracks once again. "Foxdung."

Dustystorm smirked, clearly holding back a purr of amusement. "Oh? Now who's imagining things?"

I flicked my ear irritably, glancing up at the dark sky. There were no raindrops falling, no steady drizzle - just the thick canopy of leaves stretching overhead.

"Hm..." I murmured, worry and dread beginning to fill my stomach. "...Maybe it was tree spit," I tried to tell myself.

Dustystorm chuckled, but we both moved on, ears flicking every so often, as if daring another raindrop to fall.

And we determinedly kept following Nightwing's scent, weaving through the undergrowth, paws silent against the forest floor. The further we went, the deeper into the forest we got, the more a nagging feeling twisted in my gut.

And then, that very fact, that very realization that we were going *deeper* into the forest struck me like a blow to the muzzle.

I skidded to a halt, to Dustystorm's surprise.

The poor tom nearly bumped into me. "What—"

"Marigold grows by the lake," I then hissed, my teeth barred.

His eyes widened slightly. I could see he was trying his hardest to understand what I meant. "...And?"

"If she really was going to collect marigold..." I began to

Dustystorm, my voice tight with irritation, "Why in the name of StarClan is her scent leading us in the opposite direction?"

With that explanation, clearly Dustystorm finally got it, his pale blue gaze darkening and his shoulders sinking with disappointment. "Because... she really did lie to us."

"I can't believe it!" I nearly yowled. Just after, Dustystorm had to *shhhh* me – just because he and I had stopped didn't mean that Nightwing wasn't too far off.

Nightwing – that scheming little sneaky she-cat.

Great StarClan, what a weak lie she had given us. Did she not realize that one of my other best friends was Jayfeather, the *medicine cat*, who I had helped collect herbs with on several occasions? I would have immediately been able to clock her lies about collecting marigold.

And, well, I *had*.

But... *why* in the name of StarClan had she lied to her best friend and her brother? What was she up to, and where was she going?

Well, I had hoped that Dustystorm and I would be able to find out in that moment, and that night.

But no, life has to *suck* sometimes.

I was completely yanked out of my thoughts when something cold and heavy plopped on my nose, nearly causing me to sneeze.

Another darn rain drop. This time, there was no denying it.

Clearly, Dustystorm had received a few of himself beside me, and I heard him let out a long groan. "Oh, come on."

Another drop. Then another.

Within moments, the drizzle turned into a steady, pattering rain, soaking into our pelts and dampening the earth beneath us. The cool, fresh scent of rain filled the air, and with it came the

inevitable truth—

Nightwing's scent was fading fast.

I gritted my teeth. "Foxdung."

Dustystorm shook out his fur, exasperated. "Great. That's just what we needed."

I flattened my ears against my head. The scent trail was going to be impossible to follow now. Even if we kept going, we'd just be two soaked, clueless idiots stumbling through the woods in the dark.

I hated this. I hated leaving a mystery unsolved. Hated feeling like I was backing down. But even I had to admit that pushing forward now was pointless.

"Great," I then sighed. "...We have to turn back."

Dustystorm sighed, shaking rain from his whiskers. "Fantabulous," he then sighed.

"Darn it, I was really hoping that we'd be able to follow her," I then hissed, practically hot with frustration now.

"Me too," Dustystorm huffed. "But we made some progress, didn't we? We..."

He then took a deep breath. "We realized that Nightwing wasn't doing what she said she was."

"That's true, I suppose," I replied to my mate before letting out a sigh.

I then gave a shake of my fur as I sniffed amusement, trying to get some of the water out of my fur even as it continued to pour down. "Well, I guess this also spoils our hunting plans."

"Just a bit!" Dustystorm purred. He then beckoned me forward with his tail, nearly breaking into a run. "Let's get out of here and get to the warriors den!"

I quickly pelted after him. "Oh, trying to race, are you?"

Dustystorm glanced behind me as I began to catch up to him, his eyes wide with alarm. "Hey, don't go too fast! You'll slip and hurt yourself again!"

I let out a snort, running past him. "Oh, you just don't want me to win!"

"Bet!"

The two of us then managed to let out *mrrows* of laughter as we then proceeded to race together back to camp, the raindrops crashing against our pelts as we swerved past trees, jumped over roots, and practically soared through the wet grass.

But even as we both ran so carelessly, so many thoughts still swirled in my mind, and anger and confusion tugged at my stomach.

Nightwing had lied. And not just some harmless, silly lie—she had deliberately led us to believe she was gathering herbs when she was actually sneaking off to who-knows-where.

And the worst part? I had no idea why.

I stole a glance at Dustystorm. Even as we ran, he looked just as deep in thought, his ears flicking with irritation. He was probably wondering the same things I was. What was she hiding? Why didn't she trust *us* of all cats? We clearly were going to be talking about this in depth when we were sheltered in the warriors den.

I then clenched my jaw. I *hated* this feeling. This weird, creeping sense that something was off.

And it wasn't just Nightwing, of course. Breezepelt slithering his way back into my life, Dustystorm's clearly being a bit bothered by it, and now this. The air in the Clan felt tense, like the whole forest was holding its breath, waiting for something to snap.

I flicked my tail, my claws flexing against the wet earth.

What in StarClan's name is going on with cats these days?

Chapter 11

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I had never, ever hoped to return to the Dark Forest again in any capacity.

But here I was. Well, that is, because it was a forest, and it was dark.

Either way, my claws unsheathed and sank into the ground, my rage seeming to flow through them and into the earth as I processed where I was.

Whether it was the Dark Forest or *a* dark forest – it was ominous, with the trees looming over me like tall creatures.

It was just that eerie that I luckily knew that this wasn't real. *But instead, another one of these stupid nightmares...*

I actually let out a loud, frustrated sigh from where I stood in that dark clearing. *Great. I wonder what wondrous things could possibly happen next!*

And, almost as if right on cue, I flicked my ears as I saw the smallest flash out of the corner of my eye. *Hm.*

I then rolled my eyes as I turned to face where I'd seen the flash. *Mmhm.*

Two eyes. Blue eyes.

Great StarClan, I was so tired of this.

I found I could simply watch as the two blue eyes then seemed to get closer... and closer....

And then, they blinked. Slowly.

The shape around them then pulled itself from the void. As it always had been before... like *he* always had been, it was massive and crouched low, like it had always been there. *Waiting* and *scheming*.

Its limbs long and heavy, shoulders hunched unnaturally, it then began to slink forward.

No sound. Just its movement.

My heart thudded once, too loud in my ears. I felt my fur beginning to bristle.

The familiar figure began to circle. One wide, deliberate loop around me... then another.

I simply stood still, tail twitching, resisting the growing weight in my chest. It was subtle at first—that familiar pressure...

That... temptation.

Like a thorn pricking the back of my thoughts. Power. Control. Strength beyond what the forest had ever allowed me. The feeling of knowing I was better.

I screwed my eyes shut, those words and thoughts filling me with fear and dread as quickly as they had arrived. *No. Not again.*

I tensed my shoulders, trying to breathe steady. The presence passed in front of me again, slow, prowling. Watching with mischievous yet hopeful eyes.

The pressure curled deeper, like fog winding between my ribs and then pulling each one away from each other. It whispered—not with words, but with *feeling*. The cold thrill of victory. The hunger of ambition. The echo of claws sinking into someone else's throat—because I *could*.

No.

I dug my claws into the earth. *I'm not that cat. I'm not. I never was.*

The forest grew darker. Ashfur, this figure—whatever it was—paused in front of me, his blue eyes glowing brighter, sharper.

It lunged.

Not with claws. Not with teeth.

But with darkness. It slammed into me like a wave—cold and consuming. I staggered back, chest pounding, vision flashing white around the edges. My paws felt slick. My thoughts buzzed, confused, angry.

It was in me. Or *trying* to be.

But I wouldn't ever let it.

The presence faltered as I tried to shove it away violently in my own thoughts, and I tore myself away—running, blinking, gasping.

And after just a moment of pelting through that dark forest and that blue-eyed figure, I shot awake – the sun outside the warriors den becoming the most stark, yet relieving contrast to what I had just experienced.

But I hadn't even looked up for a moment before letting out a groan and letting my head fall in between my paws. *At first I thought I was just going to be able to muddle through these dreams...* I thought to myself. I've tried so hard. *But I* can't *when...*

I then lifted my head, simply letting my chin rest on my paws as I then felt a soft tail run itself across my back, back and forth. I then lifted my own tail, catching Cherryfall's once it was closer, proceeding to twin it around my own and hold it tightly.

I then let out another sigh before looking over my shoulder, managing to let out a small purr as I met Cherryfall's concerned, searching big brown eyes. *She manages to make me feel like everything is okay after I have a nightmare about drowning in darkness...*

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" my mate then asked me softly.

I gave her a nod, tightening my grip on her tail. "Yes, I am."

"A nightmare?"

I then let out a sigh, turning my head so that I could look blankly at the den wall. "Isn't it always..." I then breathed, a chill running down my spine as I began to relay everything in my own head. *Several* heartbeats had already gone by since I woke up, but I still felt like I was coming down from it.

"Foxdung," Cherryfall murmured after letting out an annoyed huff. I then looked back at the she-cat when I felt her shift beside me. "Do you want to talk about it? Or..."

I then had to hold back another purr as she looked down at her paws shyly. "Or do you maybe need some time to calm down? I don't want to clutter your brain if-"

I immediately shook my head, letting the purr that was rising in my throat come out as I shifted even closer to the ginger tabby she-cat and touched my muzzle to hers. "I really am okay, Cherryfall," I reassured her one again. "And unlike I am with most cats, I am always willing to talk to you."

Cherryfall's eyes seemed to glow for a moment, in the same way and excitement that they always seemed to when we first started to get close to each other, whenever I'd been brave enough to give her a compliment, or let the feelings I'd been nervous to show slipped through the cracks a little. *And it's just as cute now as it was then.* "Okay," my mate meowed, her eyes then wiping over with concern again. "Well, in that case... are you comfortable with me asking what happened in your nightmare?"

I nodded, putting my paw on top of hers for a moment. "Again, with you, always."

And after Cherryfall gave me a warm, encouraging look, I took a deep breath, another chill running down my back as I tried to recall what I'd experienced. "Well, basically condense all of my time with Ashfur and the Dark Forest into a single nightmare, then make it all weird and dreamlike and cryptic, and then you've got what I

dreamed about..."

I then found myself having to hold back a hiss of frustration as I almost seemed to *feel* that dark silhouette take over me all over again. "Cherryfall, it's like he was testing me all over again... tempting me to go towards evil... ambition... *selfishness*," I continued, my claws unsheathing and sinking into our soft nest. "It's like his own dementedness was trying to take over my *body*. Great StarClan, it was awful."

I then nervously looked back at Cherryfall for just a moment as I shrugged. "I ran away from it all, but..." As my stomach began to feel heavy, I then felt my mate unwind her tail from mine and begin stroking my back as I went on. "if nothing else... it reminded me of how close I was to that in *real life*. I can't believe Ashfur was so close to dragging me down with him."

"But he didn't succeed, Swiftflight," Cherryfall immediately insisted to me softly.

I gave a light nod in agreement – I wasn't even sure if Cherryfall would notice it. "I know, but..." I then took another deep breath. "It was still... awful."

I then fully looked back at Cherryfall as I heard her let out a deep, frustrated huff. "Ugh, Swiftflight," she then sighed as her big amber eyes glowed with sympathy and worry, "I am so sorry that you had to deal with all of that."

I gave my mate a shrug. "It's okay, really. I mean..." I then narrowed my eyes as a thought crossed my mind that made my heart suddenly feel like a boulder. *But it makes sense...* "Maybe considering just how close I was to all of that... I need to be reminded."

"Oh, Swiftflight, don't think like that," Cherryfall immediately demanded to me.

"Why not?" I asked, surprised as her tail begin to lash back and forth urgently.

"Swiftflight, you and I, and everyone and their mother – even *my*

mother, which we both know is a feat – in this Clan know very well that you are so, *so* far beyond that cat that Ashfur tried to make you into, and you have acknowledged your past so many times," she insisted to me, her voice even but sharp. "Any StarClan cat or entity that thinks you would need to be reminded *this* way is... is... insane!"

I then put my tail on my mate's shoulder, hating that something I'd said had gotten her so worked up. "Goodness, I hate that this is happening to you, Swiftflight," she meowed as her head shook back and forth. "After all that you've been through, all of that Ashfur nonsense is still hanging around... and you looked so stressed when you woke up, and I... *hate* it."

I then found myself having to push down regret as I rubbed my own tail along Cherryfall's flank. Seeing her so stressed is just as difficult for me to endure, for StarClan's sake. "I hate it too," I told my mate softly. "And... I know that I've worked really hard to move away from my past, and I guess that I shouldn't be tormented about it after all of this time..."

"Absolutely not," Cherryfall meowed quickly.

"But even if the dream wasn't there to torment me..." I then continued after giving Cherryfall a look of gratitude. "I sure *felt* tormented, and..."

I then gave a weak shrug. "For me at least, it's hard *not* to think that my dreams aren't just taunting me about my past, and that that's what I deserve." *As horrible as it sounds, and as far as I've come... why else would I be getting dreams like this?*

"It's not what you deserve at all, Swiftflight," Cherryfall told me, her brown eyes worried and persistent. "You've come so far."

"I know," I replied to the she-cat, trying to take in and fully internalize everything she was saying – the *actual* truth – as I took another deep breath. "I know. And in all honesty, these nightmares are likely... well, like you said, just a culmination of all that I've been through with Ashfur."

I finally brought myself to stand up and take a small stretch – Cherryfall's words and continued separation from my nightmare already beginning to make me feel better. "They're annoying and not fun to face. And this one was especially bad, but..."

I then fully straightened myself up, taking a deep breath. "Like we've said, I'll get through it." *Great StarClan, but for how long?* I then couldn't help but ask myself. *Sure, experiences like this take a while to leave a cat, but the nightmares seem to be getting worse...*

Almost as if Cherryfall could hear my thoughts, she stood up herself and gave me a gentle lick on the head. "Swiftflight, you are the strongest, most incredible tom that I know. You *will* get through it," she then told me warmly. I then felt my stomach twist as I met her soft, encouraging gaze. "I know that's harder to see since the nightmares are becoming so much, but you fought off this one – you'll fight off the rest."

As I always did whenever I looked at Cherryfall for more than one heartbeat, I began getting lost in her brown gaze as I felt my heart fill with affection and gratitude. "Having cats like you to fight them off for makes it even easier," I whispered to the she-cat before digging my muzzle into her neck fur as she let out a purr. And after the two of us simply drank in each other's scents for a few moments, I thought I heard Cherryfall let out a contemplative grunt.

I then pulled away to find her looking very pensive, her eyebrows furrowed as she stared ahead. "What?" I pressed to her.

The she-cat then shook her head, as if to snap herself out of it. "Oh! I was just thinking..." she then began as she tilted her head to the side and looked back at me. "Didn't you tell me that Lilypetal was having nightmares kind of like this too? I wonder if you should talk to her about them?"

I gave a flick of my ears. "That's true..." *She said that she was seeing Ashfur in hers too, I believe, and that they were also giving her lots of trouble,* I realized. *I wonder what happens in hers?*

I then gave a small snort. *What the two of us went through was very*

different, but there was a very common denominator...

I then narrowed my eyes as I saw a figure from outside quickly approaching the warriors den entrance. "Hm, speaking of," I then muttered out loud. Lilypetal – not the common denominator, thank StarClan.

Lilypetal then practically seemed to burst into the warriors den – and although her eyes seemed bright and determined, there was a glint of stress there, and the tiredness around them and her slightly bristled fur told a different story. "Swiftflight and Cherryfall, good morning!" she meowed to us – cheerfully but out of breath.

"Good morning, Lilypetal!" Cherryfall replied, her genuine sweetness making my stomach twist with affection. "Did you need something?"

I flicked my ears in surprise when the ThunderClan deputy nodded to me. "I was coming to grab Swiftflight!" she replied. "Do you think that you and Ivypool would be able to go out and grab some juniper berries for Leafpool and Jayfeather?"

My eyes then widened. "Me?" *...and Ivypool?* "Why me?"

Lilypetal then snorted and shrugged. "Oh, don't worry, I asked Jayfeather the same question for you – apparently Goldenshine told him that you knew what they looked like." The brown tabby and white she-cat then rolled her eyes, though they glowed with affection. "Leafpool and Jayfeather are busy right now, and Goldenshine the resident honorary medicine cat is currently on patrol, so she can't get them."

"Wow, that is a dilemma," Cherryfall then purred. She then gave me a light nudge. "*Do* you know what they look like, Swiftflight?"

I nodded, only having to ponder the question for a single heartbeat. "I mean... yeah, I do!" *How could I forget them when they're basically my mother's sister's... or best friend's... staple?*

I then let out a purr and gave a shrug. "Alright, I'll be out there in just a moment."

Lilypetal then let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Swiftflight. And Cherryfall –" The deputy then nodded to my mate. "in a little while, Emberheart is leading a hunting patrol that I'd like you to join."

As I had expected, Cherryfall immediately nodded eagerly. "Okay, perfect! I'll be there!"

Lilypetal let out a quieter sigh this time, followed by a grateful nod. "Thank you both!"

Then, with that, the she-cat left the den as quickly as she'd entered it. "I'll see you both later!"

I found I could only watch my kin go in amazement for a few moments before looking back at Cherryfall, my head shaking back and forth. "I will talk to Lilypetal... *not* today."

"That's totally fair!" Cherryfall meowed as she purred with amusement. "Poor thing, she seems so stressed."

"I know..." I then muttered. *Wow, with her new deputy position and those nightmares...* I then realized to myself. *Forget* me*! I hope she's doing okay.*

I then gave a shrug. "For now... I guess I'll go and collect juniper berries."

Cherryfall let out a purr and touched her muzzle to my cheek. "Darn right, you will."

I then slowly began to narrow my eyes. "Collect juniper berries... with Ivypool." I tried to search Cherryfall's amber gaze as she pulled away from my cheek. "Cherryfall, is that okay with you?"

To my surprise, Cherryfall immediately nodded, looking genuinely not worried in the slightest bit. "Of course it is, Swiftflight!"

I raised my eyebrows back at her. "Really?"

"Yes, you're fine!"

"Are you sure?" I pressed. "I remember..." *We've talked about it in the*

past – how I used to really admire Ivypool... but I know Cherryfall used to worry back when we were first getting close...

I then felt my stomach twist – not because of anything I worried I would do, but I really hated the thought of Cherryfall thinking that I'd ever be disloyal to her. "Cherryfall, if it makes you uncomfortable, I seriously won't-"

"Swiftflight, don't worry!" Cherryfall meowed, her voice only warm and kind. "It really is okay."

"It is?"

"I mean, I'm the one that got you, right?" At those words, I couldn't help but purr with amusement along with her as I began to fill with relief. I then had to hold back another purr as I saw her amber eyes glowing with love. "But in all seriousness, I trust you. You rejected Pinenose at that Gathering, for one. But also..."

She then brought her tail forward to twin it with mine again. "After all that we've been through, I think I can be pretty certain that I've got you for good."

I immediately nodded back at my mate. "Oh, you do," I whispered before touching my muzzle to hers again. "I love you. So much."

"I love you too," Cherryfall purred before licking my cheek again. "So much. Now go have fun!"

"Okay," I meowed, touching my nose to Cherryfall's ear and beginning to pad out of the den. "Have fun on your hunting patrol!"

"Have fun hunting berries!"

Giving my mate one last warm look and a purr, I then proceeded to make my way out of the warriors den. And honestly, I couldn't help but feel a large wave of gratitude that Cherryfall was okay with me and Ivypool going out into the forest.

Truthfully, I didn't have any feelings for Ivypool at all and I don't think I fully ever did – I loved Cherryfall with everything I had and only her, but especially with all of the shared experiences that

Ivypool that I had with the Dark Forest, I was thankful to still have her in my life in some semblance. *And maybe I'll be able to talk to her about my nightmares too?*

The relief I felt began to diminish when I fully stepped out of the warriors den, and I immediately narrowed my eyes as my gaze fell on the sky – a sky that was almost now completely lacking any sun. *Wow, that sun sure went away fast.*

I then couldn't help but let out a huff as I then began to pad towards the camp entrance. *Great. Nothing like an incoming storm to distract me from my nightmare of darkness.*

Despite my annoyance, I forced a tail lash and a nod in greeting to the silver tabby and white pelt of Ivypool, who was waiting for me at the camp tunnel.

"That's a great face," she muttered to me, her blue eyes glowing with humor.

"I'm not a fan of this weather," I murmured in reply.

"Fair enough," Ivypool then meowed. Her next words came out quite sarcastically. "I'm *sure* that collecting juniper berries will help get your mind off of it."

And my reply was just as sarcastic. "The best distraction." Then, the two of us exchanged a humored glance before padding one behind the other out of camp.

And as soon as the both of us came out the other side of the tunnel, I looked back at the silver she-cat with confusion. "Hold on, I know why *I* was chosen to pick juniper berries. Why did Jayfeather pick you?"

Ivypool picked up her pace so that she could catch up to me. "Oh, I had already been talking to the grumpy mouse-brain, and he sent me out while I was in there." The silver and white she-cat then let out a sigh and began shaking her head. "I was just asking him if he'd dreamt or seen anything else from the Dark Forest..."

I flicked my ears at that comment, but let the she-cat continue.

"...I don't know, to see if anything else was lingering?" Ivypool then meowed. "I know it's been *days* since the battle, but I just like to make sure."

"That's very understandable," I murmured, my heart already rising in pace with anticipation. "And... has he seen anything?"

Ivypool simply shrugged. "Nothing of note, apparently – thank StarClan."

Imagine having a dream that has nothing of note in it, I thought as I huffed and rolled my eyes. "Wow, that must be nice," I then muttered out loud.

Ivypool narrowed her blue eyes back at me. "What do you mean?"

I then found myself having to push back immense frustration, and tried to stay calm as I decided to just spill it all to Ivypool. I was so thankful to have cats like Cherryfall or Goldenshine that I could always go to, but having someone in ThunderClan that almost *fully* understood my situation was something I didn't want to take for granted.

And anyway, Ivypool and I had hardly gotten to speak to each other since *before* the Great Battle – when the two of us were recruited to teach ThunderClan Dark Forest fighting moves, and we'd been meaning to catch up on these sorts of things anyway. "I've had dreams... *nightmares* almost every night, Ivypool!" I revealed to the she-cat, my voice still coming out in a slight hiss.

I saw her eyes widen beside me as I went on. "I'm there in the Dark Forest, still being haunted by Ashfur and his stupid, evil blue eyes... they're so vivid, and *haunting*, and they're just... *awful*." Without me even realizing it at first, I had come to a stop, my unsheathed claws sinking into the ground. "It's like he was actually there, trying to bring me back into that evil, and trying to convince me all over again that fighting and aggression is all that matters..."

I then gave a conceding, helpless shrug. "Why am I dealing with this while our Clan's medicine cat isn't receiving a thing?"

I then felt Ivypool place the tip of her tail on my shoulder in support. "Swiftflight, while Jayfeather has had his fair share of conflict with the Dark Forest, he didn't train there for moons and moons like you and I did."

For some reason, that didn't give me a whole lot of comfort. "I guess, but... it's just... a *lot* having to have to face the past so much, especially one like ours."

I then flicked my ears, feeling more hopeful as I looked back at my Clanmate. "Are you having dreams too?"

I continued to feel hopeful as I watched Ivypool slowly narrow her eyes, her gaze dark. "I actually am..." she answered. "Every once in a while."

Oh thank StarClan. "Really?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even. Sure, I didn't like hearing that Ivypool was also having to deal with what I was, but at the same time, hearing that I wasn't alone already made everything seem better. "What are yours about?"

To my surprise, Ivypool didn't immediately answer, causing me to shift my paws back and forth uncomfortably. "Sorry, you don't have to share."

"No, it's fine," the she-cat quickly insisted. "It's just..."

She then sniffed as she looked down at her paws. "I just hope you don't think less of me."

I stared down at the she-cat, certain that I was giving her the most deadpan expression in existence. "Ivypool, I refused to help you spy in the Dark Forest, and did nothing for ThunderClan except train to fight like a Dark Forest cat for moons," I meowed to her, "and you're worried I'll think less of *you?*"

Ivypool then released a heavy sigh, and when she looked back at me, I was shocked by the amount of dread and darkness I saw in her blue eyes. "Swiftflight, believe it or not, what I did in the Dark Forest was worse." She then took a deep breath, closing her eyes. "I *killed* a cat in the Dark Forest while I was training there. Not too

long before the Great Battle."

I found I couldn't speak, my eyebrows raising. *Whoa.*

"I felt trapped," Ivypool went on, "and cats like Hawkfrost and Tigerstar made me feel like I had no choice, and... well..."

She then shrugged. "It's surely going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I expect to have nightmares about it."

Even after the she-cat was done speaking, I still was speechless for a few moments. *Wow...* I thought. *I... wow. I can't believe that she was brought to do something like that.* "Wow, Ivypool," I then said out loud.

I then felt myself getting dizzy at hearing all of this – sure, hearing that Ivypool had been pressured into killing someone was one thing, but... it made me feel just as uneasy realizing that... *I was probably just days from being forced to do something like that too...*

"I know. It was terrible," Ivypool then nearly whispered, breaking me out of my thoughts. "I shouldn't have done it."

"I mean, of course you shouldn't have, but..." I then briefly touched my tail to the she-cat's shoulder. "Know that I don't think less of you." *At least, I'm going to try not to. Again... that could have been me if I hadn't gotten out of there...*

I then closed my eyes for a moment and gave a sniff. "I understand. Trust me."

"I know you do," Ivypool then meowed, her eyes gleaming with gratitude. "And you know what? I gave you all of that flack for not spying with me in the Dark Forest all of those moons ago, but..."

The she-cat then looked back down at her paws. "You also thought that you had no choice."

"It doesn't justify it though," I insisted to Ivypool.

"Yeah, for both of us."

"Exactly."

"Well, geez..." my Clanmate then breathed after a moment, looking back up at me. "Our choices in the Dark Forest are coming back to haunt both of us, huh?"

I gave a huff and nodded in agreement. "No kidding." *And unfortunately, I don't think our situations have as much in common as I'd hoped they would...* I then thought to myself.

I then found my head beginning to spin all over again as Ivypool and I began to travel through the forest once again. *Ivypool killed someone against her will. Of course that's going to haunt her – it would haunt any cat. And despite that, she's only dreaming about it every once in a while?*

I then forced myself to take a deep breath. *The way that each cat copes with their past and their choices is different, but... I still can't help but be confused.* "This is going to be a weirdly specific question..." I began after hesitating a few moments. "But how often do you have your nightmares?"

I simply watched as Ivypool pondered the question for a moment. "Hm... they're very sporadic," she eventually answered, "but maybe once in a quarter moon now?"

Hm. "Not every night?" I pressed her.

"Closer to when it happened, definitely," the silver she-cat then answered. "But they've slowly started to fade away, thank StarClan."

"I see..." I murmured, finding that I had to push down frustration once again. "So why are mine getting worse and *more* frequent the further away it all gets?" *Again, cats deal with the trauma of their past differently, but what I'm dealing with just feels so... pointed?*

I looked back at Ivypool, surprised to see that her eyes were filled with curiosity and concern, as if she had heard my thoughts and *agreed*? "That is strange..." she then murmured. "Should you maybe also stop by Jayfeather or Leafpool at some point? Maybe they'll have some idea?"

With those words, I gave a sharp nod. *Anything to make me feel better about these flashbacks.* "Sounds like a plan. I'll see if I can stop by later today."

I then pricked my ears as I thought I heard shuffling up ahead – several pawsteps, in fact. "Hm, I think that border patrol that was sent out earlier is coming back," I then muttered.

"It's about time they should," Ivypool meowed, proceeding to shake out some of the rain droplets from her fur. "Just by looking at the clouds, it's going to be a rough rain storm soon."

I jumped back as the droplets from Ivypool's fur suddenly ended up on *my* fur. I covered my eyes with a paw and then shook out my own fur. "A 'hey, Swiftflight, step back, I'm about to *drench* you' would have been nice."

Ivypool purred with amusement, giving me a playful nudge. "Oh, you'll live. You were already getting some raindrops anyway." As I rolled my eyes, my Clanmate then nodded ahead. "There's the patrol now."

I followed Ivypool's gaze to indeed see four ThunderClan cats heading our way – Molewhisker was at the front, with Mousewhisker, Berrynose, and Goldenshine following behind him. I gave a nod to Molewhisker – now sort of my kin though Cherryfall – brushed my tail against the shoulder of Mousewhisker – my father still as far as ThunderClan knew,

And touched my nose to the ear of Goldenshine – I think it's pretty clear who she is at this point. "Good morning," I then meowed to the golden brown tabby she-cat. "How are you?"

I couldn't help but purr with amusement as my mother let out a long, annoyed huff. "Ugh, fine," she then murmured. "How are you?"

I gave Goldenshine a shrug. "Ugh, fine," I replied, an edge of humor in my voice.

The two of us then exchanged a quick purr, and I gave one last nod to my mother as she continued to follow her patrol through the

forest.

I then looked back at Ivypool, who looked both amused and confused at the same time. "Uh, are you two good?" she asked me. "What was that about?"

I let out a sniff and rolled my eyes once again. "Oh... well, the both of us have been going through things lately. *Not* with each other, thank StarClan." *Thank StarClan infinitely.* "You know, I'm having my nightmares, but..."

I then found myself having to close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to decide how much I wanted to disclose to my Clanmate. After all, Ivypool – among everyone else in ThunderClan except for Lilypetal, Thornclaw, Snowstorm, Cherryfall and Jayfeather (to my knowledge) – did not know that Breezepelt was my father. *It was a plan to keep it as a secret for the rest of our lives, but... I feel like I can tell Ivypool, genuinely*, I told myself. *I trust her, and she has directly witnessed Breezepelt's treachery and his time in the Dark Forest – way more than I have. I want her input.*

I then let out a huff. *What I will do with that input, maybe nothing at all*, I then thought. *But at least I'll know more about what Goldenshine and I are dealing with here.* "Ivypool, I'm about to tell you something crazy," I began – *probably not the best way to begin. However...* "I know you literally just told me that you killed a cat in the Dark Forest, but..."

Ivypool's eyes immediately widened back at me. "Oh no, Swiftflight, what did you do?"

I narrowed my eyes at the she-cat irritably. "I, Ivypool, didn't do a *thing*."

I then took a deep breath, having no idea how much context I could or would give. "To make a long story short... Mousewhisker is not my father..." I then trailed off for a moment, mentally preparing for Ivypool's reaction. "Breezepelt is."

Ivypool's eyes simply widened as she waited for me to continue. "Him and my mother used to meet in secret, and eventually I came

into existence," I went on. "Breezepelt let Goldenshine take me, they separated, and..."

I then let out a snort. "Well, as you've seen, Breezepelt sort of went down a dark path after that." I then looked back at Ivypool, honestly amused by her now completely flabbergasted reaction. "Alright, I'll stop for a moment so that you can digest that part."

"Much appreciated," Ivypool immediately meowed, her head shaking slowly and her eyes still wide. "I mean... understandable as to why you would keep that a secret... but *wow*..."

She then looked down at the ground, looking as if she was trying to sort her thoughts. "Goldenshine and Breezepelt? Breezepelt..." I then blinked in surprise as the silver she-cat looked at me up and down. "Oh, that makes so much more sense."

"Hm. Unfortunately, it does," I muttered dismissively to Ivypool. "Ready for more?"

Ivypool seemed to take one more moment to digest before giving a sharp nod. "Sure."

"Alright," I breathed. "Well, you and I both know that Breezepelt hasn't made the best of choices in the last several moons. And he's been pretty cold towards me – among everyone else, and he's been vicious... *too* vicious, with Goldenshine on several occasions. And now..."

I tried to keep my fur flat and my voice even as I went on. "And now he's trying to talk to us and have a relationship with us, since we're his family." *I still can't even believe it... the fact that he even acknowledged it...*

"No way..." Ivypool breathed a few moments after I finished. "And this is really Breezepelt that we're talking about here?"

"I can't believe it myself. And he's been *quite* persistent," I then revealed, my tail beginning to twitch anxiously. "He spoke with me while I was in WindClan, and he actually helped Goldenshine fight off some stoats when ThunderClan and WindClan were fighting

them off."

To my surprise, Ivypool's eyes were wide with fascination. "Wow," she then murmured. "That definitely is something."

I stared back at Ivypool in bewilderment, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of hope at seeing the she-cat's surprised reaction. "You think so?" *Something... good? I mean, do I have a reason to believe him?*

Ivypool then let out an amused sniff. "Well, I *would*..." she then hesitated. "...if it wasn't Breezepelt."

With those words, I then had to fight my own disappointment... and then fight myself fighting the disappointment. "Really?" I then forced out.

The fascination and surprise in Ivypool's eyes was now gone, and all I could see now was anger and resentment. "Swiftflight, you left the Dark Forest before you got to see even a *quarter* of the evil that took over Breezepelt. He sickened me every single night with the things that he said, the things that Brokenstar managed to put into his head..."

The silver and white she-cat then seemed to take a moment to think. "He basically swore to kill Lionblaze, Hollyleaf and Jayfeather just because they were Crowfeather's other kits, and it felt like he was at the head when the Dark Forest finally went to fight the Clans," she then continued. "He did *all of this* while still managing to keep his place in WindClan, after *all of these moons*."

For the hundredth time today, my head felt full, and I think it looked apparent to Ivypool with the gaze of sympathy she then gave me. "Listen, maybe there's something I don't know that you do, and you can react to the situation in whatever way you think is best, but if you ask me, any good that Breezepelt would ever do would be to save face. I wouldn't trust a hair on his pelt."

Of course, with everything Ivypool had just said, I didn't reply immediately, having to take several moments to process her words... and, further push down my disappointment and *hating* that

I felt disappointed. *This is what you knew all along*, I then told myself. *Why is hearing the truth so hard for me?*

"Swiftflight?"

I then gave a quick shake of my head, pulling myself out of my thoughts as Ivypool called my name. "Hm?"

"Are you okay?"

I forced myself to give my Clanmate a sharp nod. "Yes, I'm fine," I answered with a sigh. "And you're right. It's..."

I then took a deep breath. "It's bold of him to even think that he could trick us after all of this time." I then gave a dismissive shake of my tail. "Honestly, I think Goldenshine and I just want to forget about it and move on. The both of us were fine without him, and I-"

I was then interrupted when the loud crackling of thunder boomed in the sky above us – so sharp and loud that I thought Ivypool and I were about to watch the sky split in half. But instead, we both we covered in rain as it began to pour down – *hard*. We might as well have both jumped in the lake with how soaked we were in just a few heartbeats.

"Foxdung!" Ivypool shouted over the rain. "Now we're sopping wet, and we didn't even get Jayfeather's juniper berries."

"Maybe not!" I shouted right back. "We're actually really close to where they are – let's at least grab a few and then make a run for it!"

Ivypool stared at me as if I'd told her that the whole Breezepelt story actually had been a bit. "Are you crazy!?"

"Just don't want to be ripped to shreds by our medicine cat!" I called out as I gestured Ivypool forward with my tail, leading her deeper into the forest. "There's a bush in this clearing up ahead."

"I hate you!" Ivypool then yowled, bringing me to purr with amusement. "By the way, your secret is safe with me!"

I nodded, giving the she-cat a look of gratitude as we arrived at the juniper bush. "Thanks, Ivypool."

"Sure!" The she-cat's eyes then narrowed as the two of us began to collect berries. "Can I get you to reveal another secret for me?"

I stared apprehensively back at the she-cat. "Oh, no. What?" Still having to shout over the rain, mind you.

"Did you have a crush on me when we were both apprentices?"

I rolled my eyes, shocked that I hadn't seen that one coming. "I looked up to you a lot and you made me nervous!"

"Cool!"

"Could you tell?"

"It was obvious!"

"Great!" I replied in an overexaggerated enthusiastic tone as I grabbed a few final berries from the bush. "Now let's hurry up and get these juniper berries to the medicine den so that I can tell Cherryfall how much I love her."

"And take shelter too!" Ivypool then meowed. "This rain is coming down *fast*."

I then watched as the silver and white she-cat stepped out of a deep rain puddle that had formed within *heartbeats*, and then, the two of us began to pelt through the immensely wet forest. "This is one of the nastiest storms I think I've ever seen!"

Chapter 12

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Great geese gawking at some grass, this is not good.

This storm that had only seemed to start a few moments ago was coming down on the camp *hard*. It was one of several rainstorms the Clans had had in the last few days, and it seemed determined to beat all of its predecessors – the thunder sounded like cracking boulders, and I was certain that with the size of these raindrops, a single one could probably drown a small mouse.

From where I was standing near the Highledge, having just finished checking in with the last patrols for the day, a deep puddle was already forming around my paws. *Shoot, shoot, shoot.*

I then flicked my ears in surprise as I heard alarmed and annoyed yowls come from the other side of camp, and the next thing I knew, Jayfeather, soon followed by cats like Spiderleg, Poppyfrost, and Berrynose, and several others, burst from the warriors den, all of them shivering with jagged, wet fur. "Well, the medicine den decided it was done sheltering us," the ThunderClan medicine cat hissed as he gave a shake of his fur. "The water started leaking through in two different places."

"The warriors den too?" I nearly cried out, my stress already causing my tail to twitch anxiously – I could hardly feel the rain pelting into my fur.

I then forced myself to take a deep breath. "Well, that just leaves the elders den, then. You all are going to have to fit-"

"No fitting will be happening in there!"

My gaze then shot over to the elders den, where I immediately recognized the golden brown tabby and white pelt of Emberheart

running out of the entrance. She then stepped to the side and watched as several of our Clanmates reluctantly walked out into the clearing behind her. "The back of the den just collapsed," my daughter explained, her hazel eyes wide as she stared back at me. "It's filling up with water *fast*."

"Foxdung!" I then cursed, losing my composure within just heartbeats. My head was pounding, and my heart was racing.

But thank StarClan, for *once,* I felt awake. The adrenaline that this situation was giving me was enough to help with that.

And believe it or not, before this storm had started, I had considered going to sleep a little early and trying to get some more rest after continuing to deal with some *more* nearly sleepless nights – either ones with flashbacks and nightmares that left me lying in my nest all night after they happened, or ones where I was so in and out of sleep that nightmares didn't even have *time* to happen.

And of course I knew that this lack of sleep most definitely wasn't helping my head while I was awake. *But what can I do about it?* I then thought to myself frustratedly. *I luckily haven't seen anything crazy since that stupid stoat I fought...*

I then gave a quick shake of my head. *That sounds mental,* Lilypetal. I then dug my unsheathed claws into the ground. *Whatever. It's just going to all pass.*

I then gave a shake of my fur as it suddenly felt significantly heavier with rain. *As always, I don't even have time to think about it,* I then told myself as I then frantically searched the camp, having no idea what the best course of action was.

I then flicked my ears as my gaze fell on the Highledge behind me, and I found my jaw opening without giving it much thought. "Alright, everyone, it's not ideal, but it might be our only option," I then flicked my tail towards the Highledge, specifically where the ledge itself jutted out, creating the most pitiful shelter in existence.

But nevertheless, a shelter. "Get cozy under the Highledge, and stay strong while we wait out this storm," I then called out, my heart

continuing to race as some groans rippled through the crowd of ThunderClan cats.

I then felt my heart sink as I watched my Clanmates begin to gather under the ledge, plenty of them clearly frustrated and uncomfortable as they all attempted to squeeze under and find the best spots. *Darn it, was that the right thing to do?*

"Lilypetal!"

I then whipped my head over to the camp entrance – half relieved that I wasn't going to have time to overthink my choice, and half on the brink of exploding with anxiety as I saw Swiftflight and Ivypool running up to meet me. My jaw nearly dropped as I immediately saw how soaked they were – looking almost furless with how much their wet pelts were clinging to their frames.

And to my dismay, both sets of their blue eyes were wide and full of worry. "Lilypetal, the lake is flooding like crazy," my kin began. "Ivypool thinks that the water is going to flood into camp, and I agree with her."

"Flood *into* camp!?" I exclaimed. I then flicked my gaze back and forth between the two younger cats. "How quickly are we thinking this is going to happen?"

Ivypool's eyes immediately washed over with reluctance. "Truth?"

"Give it to me."

"I'm thinking... soon. Really soon."

"Great StarClan almighty..." I then sighed, closing my eyes for just a moment. What the heck was I meant to do? I wanted to do the best thing, but *what* was it? I felt as helpless as a kit being plopped in the forest and being told to hunt out a badger.

But I forced myself to look back up at Swiftflight's and Ivypool's alarmed eyes and gesture them with my tail towards the Highledge. "Alright, thanks for letting me know. Take shelter, and I'll tell Bramblestar."

The two cats nodded worriedly back at me, and I watched for a moment, trying not to cringe as I realized that two more cats were going to have to fit under the ledge. Thankfully, Ivypool was able to squeeze in close with Dovewing, Whitewing, and Birchfall, while Swiftflight leapt in with Cherryfall and Poppyfrost.

I then gave a small nod of satisfaction before beginning to make my journey up to the Highledge. "Alright, everyone – prepare to have orders barked at you once I'm back!"

I tried to focus on the purrs I heard in response rather than the groans as I then jumped up to the next highest part of the ledge, trying not to slip on the slick surface as I did so.

But just as I was about to pad up to Bramblestar's den entrance, I abruptly stopped in my tracks, my heart beginning to beat even faster at the rumbling I heard.

I hoped to *StarClan* that it was more thunder, but unfortunately the water that was beginning to pour down from the top of the stone hollow was telling a different story. *Oh, StarClan above, how you're testing me right now...*

I picked up my pace, having to keep myself from sliding a couple of times before finally making it to Bramblestar's den and practically *bursting* inside.

And to my surprise, the ThunderClan leader was fast asleep, curled up in his moss nest with Squirrelflight right beside him. And thank goodness, despite their *clear* talent for deep sleeping, they both began to stir when I meowed their names. And after the two of them saw the look in my eyes, the rate at which they began to stand up accelerated significantly.

"So, we're having, like, our third or fourth storm in the last quarter moon – the rain destroyed *more* of the dens, and now it's looking like the entire camp may flood," I then cut to the chase – no time to ask if they had a lovely nap.

And as I had expected, Bramblestar's amber eyes immediately widened, and Squirrelflight let out an alarmed hiss. "What!?"

"The camp may flood – Ivypool and Swiftflight just told me."

"Oh, I heard you! I just... can't believe it's all happening so fast..." Bramblestar then breathed, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for the ThunderClan leader. He – along with many cats in ThunderClan – had gone to sleep once the rain had started, hoping that it would pass, but I couldn't imagine the amount of shock he was feeling to have to wake up to something *so* much worse.

I gave my leader a shrug, exchanging an exasperated look with Squirrelflight. "I can't either," I agreed with the dark brown tabby tom. "After the dens began to fall through, I wasn't sure what to do, so I sent everyone under the Highledge."

After I heard Squirrelflight seemingly snort with amusement, I flashed her an amused, yet warning look. "It was either that, or have them shivering and soaked in the camp clearing."

"I know, it's just a funny image," Squirrelflight then purred.

"But it's not an image I'd like to keep for very long, especially if Swiftflight and Ivypool were right about the lake water reaching camp," Bramblestar then muttered, seemingly half to himself as his tail twitched back and forth.

"Should we evacuate?" I then nearly threw my tail over my mouth as soon as I had spoken, worried that I'd spoken out of turn.

But to my surprise, Bramblestar's eyes widened as he stood up fully. "Do you think that we should evacuate?" I couldn't tell if I was imagining it, but his amber gaze looked searching. I then followed the tom's dark brown tabby pelt as he brushed past me, peeking his head out of his den to look out into the stone hollow. I then felt another pang of sympathy for the ThunderClan leader as his whole demeanor seemed to sink. "Wow, I... I've never seen anything like this."

"My goodness, I know! And... I..." I then trailed off, hesitating for a moment, and remaining surprised at the fact that Bramblestar had asked *me* for an opinion on what to do.

I then looked back at Bramblestar from where I'd also been staring out at the camp, meeting the tom's amber eyes, and almost as if he could read my thoughts, he gave me an encouraging nod. "I trust your judgment, Lilypetal."

Oh, goodness, should you? "I mean..."

I then gave a quick shake of my head, telling myself that I didn't have much time at all to let my head spiral. "Yes, I think that it would be best to evacuate."

Again, couldn't tell if I was imagining it, but the tom's gaze then seemed to flash with relief and gratitude as I gave my answer. "Alright, then we're evacuating," the ThunderClan leader meowed definitively.

"Thank StarClan!" Squirrelflight then meowed from where she stood on Bramblestar's other side. "Where are we going to evacuate to?"

Bramblestar let out a sigh, closing his eyes for just a moment. "That may just have to wait until after everyone is out of camp. We have no idea what it looks like out there."

"Oh goodness, then I guess we should get out there!" I purred. As I then stared down the Highledge, where I knew that almost the entirety of ThunderClan was sheltering, I found myself feeling helpless all over again. "How should we go about this?"

I then watched as Bramblestar took a deep breath before speaking. "Squirrelflight, help Jayfeather and Leafpool gather any herbs that they may need in their den."

The ThunderClan leader then nodded to me. "Lilypetal, starting ushering the cats from under the Highledge, and stop by every single den in camp and make sure that there are no stragglers. If there are, send them to the camp entrance where I will be waiting with everyone else."

Bramblestar then brushed past me, beginning to make his way down the Highledge. "Let's do this, and StarClan be with us all."

You've got that right.

As the three of us made it down to the camp clearing, I took a deep breath before turning to face the large group of ThunderClan cats clustered under the Highledge. "Alright everyone, we are evacuating camp – it's looking like the camp may flood, and we want to get out of here before it's too late," I called out to the crowd. "Bramblestar is waiting by the camp entrance to lead you all out and give some more orders."

I then whipped myself around to begin looking through all of the dens, but quickly stopped myself and looked back around. "Before I check the dens, does anyone know of cats that are for *sure* still sheltering in any of them?"

My eyes widened when I suddenly heard Lilypaw's alarmed gasp. "Purdy is still in the elders den!" my apprentice cried out. "He didn't follow us out when the roof began to leak."

"Okay, okay..." I nodded, trying my hardest to keep my mind straight as it continued to spiral. "Uh... Swiftflight!"

My kin immediately locked his gray blue eyes with mine from where he still sat with Cherryfall and Poppyfrost, giving me a nod of acknowledgement. "Help Purdy get to the camp entrance. Everyone else, go to Bramblestar!"

Swiftflight immediately stood up, giving me a sharp nod. "Of course!" he meowed to me, flashing Cherryfall a quick worried look before running over to the tangle of thorns and brambles where ThunderClan's only elder settled.

I watched my kin for a moment, my heart swelling with gratitude before once again beginning to make my journey to all of the dens.

But I was once again stopped. Not by own thoughts this time.

I whipped myself back around, my heart actually managing to fill up with some ease as I immediately met the pale blue gaze of Thornclaw. "What can I do?" my mate asked me, his eyes full of sympathy and concern.

I tried not to morph into the puddle that was right under my paws

because of the tom's kindness. *This darn sweetheart.*

I furrowed my eyebrows, knowing I couldn't afford to ponder any question for too long. I then gave a flick of my ears, my heart slightly dropping with fear as I thought of something. "Shoot, I think that Daisy is still in the nursery!" I then meowed worriedly. "Her back has been stiff since she made that trip to the horseplace. Could you help her get to the rest of the crowd?" *Great StarClan, I can't believe I almost forgot about her!*

Thornclaw gave me a sharp nod. "Absolutely," he replied. His eyes then flashed with fear for a moment. "I'm going to be seeing you join that crowd in a moment too, right?"

"Yes! Just after I check all of the dens!" I tried to reply assuredly to my mate. "Don't worry about me."

"Impossible," Thornclaw then sighed before touching his muzzle to my head briefly. "Be safe. *Please.*"

"You too!" I breathed after I gave a roll of my eyes, brushing my tail against the golden brown tabby tom's cheek before pelting towards the closest den to me.

However, on my way there, I figured I'd blast the current situation out into the hollow for those who hadn't heard. "Water is flooding into camp – gather by the camp entrance and be ready to evacuate!" As I tried to run over as fast as I could, the rain droplets almost felt like small painful pebbles slamming against my face.

I first peeked my head into the apprentice's den – empty, thank StarClan.

Next was the nursery. I'd watched Thornclaw walk Daisy out just a few moments before, and that luckily left it empty now.

Next was the medicine den, where Jayfeather and Leafpool were already back in there helping Briarlight make her way out.

Next was the warriors den, and despite the roof being damaged, there were quite a few cats in there when I peeked my head in. "Head to the camp entrance! We're trying to evacuate before the

lake water can flood into the hollow."

"*Flood* into the *hollow?*" Berrynose echoed, his amber eyes narrowed as skepticism reeked from his pelt. "No way. We've had floods and crazy rainstorms for seasons. We have no reason to evacuate."

Poppyfrost, who was standing right beside her mate, gave him a light nudge. "There's a first time for everything, Berrynose!" the tortoiseshell she-cat scolded. "Even if the camp doesn't end up flooding, it's better to be safe than sorry."

I flashed the she-cat a grateful look before gesturing out to the clearing with my tail. "Bramblestar is waiting by the camp entrance with everyone else. Get over there as *soon* as you can!"

Then, without even waiting for anyone's reply, I turned myself around to start heading to the next stop. I tried to ignore the anxiety tugging at my stomach as Berrynose's words echoed in my head. *We have no reason to evacuate*, I repeated in my head. *Bramblestar was the one that asked me if I thought we should evacuate. Am I just wasting everyone's time?*

I then forced myself to give a shake of my head, simultaneously skidding to a halt as I made it to the elder's den. *Even if I am, it's too late to turn back now.*

I peered my head past the den entrance, quickly nodding my head and stepping right back out – I'd just watched everyone leave this den, after all, but better be safe than sorry.

I then gave a flick of my ears. *It's just like Poppyfrost said,* I realized to myself. *It doesn't hurt to be safe.*

I then let out a small sigh of relief, certain that there wasn't anyone left in any of the dens. And by the looks of the cats gathered by the camp entrance, there only seemed to be one or two cats missing. *Me, and...*

I then flicked my ears with alarm. *Squirrelflight!* I realized with panic. *Where did she go after we all jumped down from the Highledge?*

I urgently began to scan my gaze around camp, telling myself that

spotting her dark ginger pelt would not be difficult. And just as I was about to pelt towards Bramblestar and ask him if he knew where his mate was, I let out a sigh of relief as I saw the she-cat emerge from the nursery, with what looked like a bunch of dandelions in her jaws.

I ran up to meet the she-cat, my head shaking back and forth. "Squirrelflight, my love, let me know you're grabbing something so that you don't scare me half to death!" The she-cat let out a purr through her full mouth as I then flicked my tail towards the dandelions. "What do we need those for?"

"Daisy's back!" Squirrelflight replied. "She didn't get a chance to eat them before Thornclaw took her out, and I wasn't sure if Leafpool and Jayfeather took any from the medicine den."

Before I could open my jaws again, as if she knew I was going to coerce her towards the camp entrance, she raised her tail up and gave a sharp nod. "Going now!" she purred to me before padding ahead. "You'd better be right behind me!"

"Will do!" I called out to the she-cat, watching as she made her way over to her Clanmates, flanking Dustpelt, her old mentor, as he seemed to be carefully walking through the slippery hollow.

And with that, I let out a huff of relief. That was everyone, I was sure of it.

But, almost as if the universe had also seen that, it almost seemed like it wanted to give us a quick scare to get us out of camp now that everyone was accounted for. My heart sank as I heard trickles of dripping water, and I looked over my shoulder to see water beginning to drip and flow down into the camp like a waterfall, crashing right down on where the elders den had been. *No!*

I didn't even have time to feel validated that my choice to evacuate clearly had been the right one.

I whipped myself back around, finally running over to join everyone else as my heart seemed to beat in my ears. "Bramblestar!" I called out to the ThunderClan leader. "We have to-"

"Already on it!" the dark brown tabby tom replied to me, clearly also having seen the horror behind me. His next words were to the entirety of ThunderClan. "Alright, everyone. There's no time to waste now. Let's get out of here!"

The ThunderClan leader then stepped to the side, nodding to where Swiftflight, Purdy, Thornclaw, and Daisy now stood at the front. "You all first," he then meowed to the four cats. "Everyone else follow them, and then Lilypetal, Jayfeather, Leafpool, Briarlight and I will bring up the rear."

Swiftflight gave a nod to Bramblestar, then letting Purdy lean on his dark gray pelt once again as they began to pad through the thorn tunnel.

But it was only a few heartbeats later that I let out an alarmed gasp, watching as Swiftflight almost *violently* shoved Purdy backwards, deeper into camp.

And just as I could barely hear my kin shout, "Get back!" through some crackling, my jaw dropped as the thorn entrance *collapsed* right then and there, its roof giving out before the walls and everything else camp down with it – piling up and completely blocking our way out.

My heart managed to pound even louder and even faster, and I found myself exchanging a terrified glance with Bramblestar. I mean, we were now *fairly* certain that the camp was going to be full of water pretty soon, and now our way out was totally blocked?

"This way, everyone!"

I then flicked my ears in surprise at the sound of Leafpool's voice coming from the corner of the hollow. The she-cat was standing near a pile of rocks and branches, which usually just served as a kit's or apprentice's play place. "It's not nearly as convenient, but this is another way out!" the medicine cat called out to ThunderClan. "Follow me, and I'll lead us to a beech tree that should give us some shelter."

I looked back at Bramblestar to see him letting out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Leafpool," the ThunderClan leader breathed. He then nodded to his Clan once again. "You heard her! Follow her that way, but *be careful*."

I then ran up to stand next to Bramblestar, watching stiffly as our Clanmates slowly but surely made their way up the rocks and through the secret entrance. Thank StarClan, Swiftflight helped Purdy up with no problem at all.

I had to admit, I was a little nervous as I watched Thornclaw helped Daisy up – her back was still clearly giving her some trouble. But after Thornclaw hoisted her up with his jaw in her scruff for the last bit, she was completely out of the camp and safe.

After my mate had made sure that Daisy was back on her paws, our gazes locked, his pale blue eyes full of fear all over again as he looked back at me. I tried my best to give him a reassuring look in return.

He still blinked back at me worriedly, staring at me for one more heartbeat before turning around and helping Daisy walk deeper into the forest. I'll see you soon, my love. Don't worry.

It simultaneously seemed to be only a few heartbeats and a few *moons* as Bramblestar and I then watched the rest of our Clanmates make their escape. As each cat made their way to the top, I couldn't help but keep a look out for each one of my kits. Thank StarClan, Wrenfeather, Lightningstrike, Emberheart, and Goldenshine had all made their way up, along with everyone else.

And eventually, it finally came time for me to make my own escape.

Bramblestar turned to face me, nodding his head towards our miracle escape route. "Alright, Lilypetal, you can take up the rear with everyone that's up there, and make sure they all make it to the beech tree. I'll help Jayfeather with Briarlight."

My eyes widened back at my leader. "Are you sure, Bramblestar? I can help too."

Bramblestar shook his head, giving me a reassuring yet urgent look

through his amber eyes. "You have done plenty, Lilypetal. Don't worry." He then gave one final flick of his tail towards the rocks. "Go on."

I gave the leader a nod, giving a lash of my tail. "I'll try my best!" I purred, the water now practically *roaring* behind me as it continued to spill into camp.

And almost felt like it would be to my benefit to *not* look behind me as I made my own way up the rocks and through the entrance. I luckily was able to make it through with only a few tiny slips in my pawsteps.

Once I'd made it to the top, I couldn't help but pad back up to the edge of the hollow, looking out into camp while I had a sort-of birds-eye view. Below me, Bramblestar and Jayfeather were still helping Briarlight through, and I tried to push down my guilt and worry as they slowly did so.

I then scanned over the rest of camp, and I could not *believe* just how quickly the water had made its way to the camp floor. Any cat that stood in it would have been completely safe. *but not for long with how quickly this is worsening*.

I then screwed my eyes shut for a moment, trying not to think too much about had now completely slipped away from anyone's control. *And after Bramblestar, Briarlight, and Jayfeather get up, everyone will be safe,* I then told myself as I began to turn around. *We've just got to-*

I then was ripped away from my own thoughts, letting out a startled yowl as I slipped on the slippery stone below me, and after scrambling to find my paws for a few moments, I found myself missing the ground, falling in thin air for just a moment before my front two paws managed to grab the edge of the stone cliff, my claws now unsheathed and sinking into whatever they could manage to keep me up. *StarClan's kits!*

I tried to hoist myself back up from where I now dangled at the top of the stone hollow, but where strength would maybe be enough now wasn't, the slickness of the stone preventing me from being

able get a better grip on the cliff.

I then could hear Bramblestar's alarmed yowl from below. "Lilypetal!" the ThunderClan leader cried out. "Hold on! I'll be right there!"

No!

I couldn't look back at the tom, only being able to lash my tail urgently back at him. "No! Keep helping Briarlight!" I cried back down to him. "I'll get myself up somehow. Briarlight needs to get up before it's too late!" I wanted to tell Bramblestar that Jayfeather probably couldn't help Briarlight on his own, but if I did, Jayfeather probably would have made his way up and pushed me off the cliff himself.

Trying to use any ounce of strength and determination I had, I then tried my darndest to pull myself up again. It wasn't to much avail, but I was going to keep trying.

And just as I thought I might be able to pull myself up, my hind paws able to grip a small piece of the hollow that was jutting out below me, my breath caught - not from exertion, though.

From... something else. *No, no, don't do this right now...*

But my mind didn't care. It dragged me backward anyway, little by little.

The sound of pounding rain became the rush of a stream. The wind in my ears became the snarl of a cat filled with nothing but vengeance.

I could almost feel the edge beneath me give way again, and suddenly, the evil, blazing blue eyes of Ashfur were looming over me at the edge of that stone hollow, and his face was twisted in triumph and hate.

I remembered dangling there by a single paw, water slamming into my lower half as I fought for my life and him just watching. Waiting. *Enjoying* it.

The memory wrapped around my spine and sank its claws in. My grip on the ledge faltered.

But I barred my teeth as I forced my claws to sink deeper into the stone above me. "Stop," I hissed to myself. "You are not there. You are *not there*."

I clenched my teeth and slammed my claws harder into the stone, dragging myself back - if not physically, then mentally.

This was not Ashfur. This was not the gorge. *And Great StarClan, I'm not going to let this insanity drive me off the edge of this cliff.* "Get a grip," I growled, half to myself, half to the rock. "Literally."

And just as my paws began to slip again, I wasn't sure if I was imagining the drumming pawsteps coming my way and the fearful cries echoing through the forest.

I then let out the smallest sigh of relief as the dark ginger pelt of Squirrelflight appeared above me, her green eyes wide and mortified, but filled with determination. "Lilypetal!" Squirrelflight's voice rang out through the thunder and rain. "Hold on! I've got you!"

My best friend was bending down, trying to help me up in a heartbeat, her claws hooking under my foreleg.

And just a moment later, I could hardly believe my eyes when Whitewing appeared beside her. "Oh my goodness, don't let go of her, Squirrelflight!"

"Why in the name of StarClan would I let go of her?" Squirrelflight snapped at the white she-cat, her tone only half-teasing.

White wing only rolled her green eyes before bending down and gripping my scruff into her jaws, and then together, her and Squirrelflight pulled me up like it was no trouble at all, gently placing me onto the wet *grass* as opposed to stone.

And as my paws hit solid ground again, I collapsed, laying there panting, water pooling under me, and my muscles screaming. "Well," I muttered between gasps, "that was... invigorating."

Squirrelflight snorted. "That is a word for it," she muttered, nosing me up once I was ready. "You alright?"

"Oh, I'm just great," I deadpanned to my friend. "Love dangling off cliffs. Really gets the blood pumping. I think I'll try it again tomorrow."

"Oh, hush it."

My best friend was already moving. Whitewing stared at me worriedly as Squirrelflight looked me over, her green eyes sharp and scanning, like she wasn't entirely convinced I wasn't about to collapse again.

"I promise you both, I'm fine," I reassured them. And thank StarClan, I was telling the truth. *Well, in some ways...* I thought, having to push down my annoyance and disappointment with myself as I recalled what had happened while I'd been dangling there. "And as ThunderClan's deputy, I insist that you two join the others at the beech tree. I'll be there soon."

Squirrelflight and Whitewing exchanged a worried look and then glanced back at me. A sort of 'You-don't-look-fine-but-I-don't-have-time-to-argue' kind of glance.

And before either of them could reply, another set of pawsteps pounded up the slope. "Lilypetal!" Thornclaw's voice cut through the storm like claws through bracken. "Are you okay?!"

He skidded to a halt beside me, glancing between me, Squirrelflight, and Whitewing. "I saw them running back toward camp, and when I noticed you weren't with the group - I had to make sure you were alright."

"I'm okay," I said, briefly twinning my tail with my mate's. "Really. Squirrelflight and Whitewing got me just in time."

"*Got you* just in time?"

"She may or may not have slipped and was dangling at the top of the stone hollow for a moment, there," Squirrelflight muttered, bringing Whitewing to purr quietly with amusement.

"Lilypetal, Great StarClan," Thornclaw breathed, his eyes closing for just a moment.

"I really am okay, Thornclaw. I promise," I meowed softly to my mate, and as I brushed my tail along his ear, he then touched his muzzle to my shoulder briefly—just long enough for me to lean into it before pulling away again. "Where is everyone?" I asked, blinking through the rain.

"They made it to the beech tree," my mate replied. "They're waiting there now."

"Good," I said firmly, shaking water from my pelt. "Then we need to join them. No one should be alone right now—not after this."

"No kidding," Thornclaw then breathed as he wrapped his tail around my shoulders. "I swear, you're going to put me in the medicine den one day."

"I'm surprised that hasn't already happened," Whitewing then meowed, bringing us all to let out small purrs of amusement.

And as the four of us started moving, I glanced back over my shoulder—just in time to see Bramblestar's dark brown tabby shape crest the top of the hollow. Jayfeather padded beside him, looking winded and thoroughly grumpy, and Briarlight—thank StarClan—was upright between them. Bramblestar murmured something as they walked, his tail lightly brushing her flank, steadying her.

I stared at them for a moment—at all of them. Soaked to the bone, cut, bruised, probably rattled beyond reason. But safe. *Thank goodness.*

And as all of us moved through the woods, our paws seemed to sink into the muddy ground with every step. The forest was quieter now, but the roars of the flood seemed to be enough to deafen us.

Thornclaw stayed close beside me, his tail still around me his shoulder brushing mine with quiet reassurance. Squirrelflight and Whitewing padded ahead, their pelts slick with rain and river spray. Bramblestar, Jayfeather, and Briarlight were just a little ways

behind us. Somewhere in the distance, I could just make out the shape of the beech tree through the trees, barely visible through the mist and drizzle.

But I wasn't thinking about the tree. I was still stuck back *there*—on the cliff, in the water, in that moment. The way my claws scrabbled for grip. The way my heart had stopped when Ashfur's face flashed through my mind like a cruel joke. I thought those memories were finally starting to leave me alone. I'd wanted to believe they were fading.

Guess I was wrong!

And fine. It didn't matter right now. It couldn't. I'd already told Thornclaw. These stupid images were getting in my way while I was trying to help my Clan through a *crisis.* It was ridiculous. How was I even going to be able to try to do all of this well if those images were dragging me down?

I mean, ThunderClan's camp had just *flooded.* It was *destroyed.* I couldn't afford to be dealing with this before, but *especially* now. But what could I do?

I then gave a quick shake of my head, trying to shake that frustration away as the beech tree loomed ahead of us, and the flood still roared behind.

One paw in front of the other. That's all I could afford right now.

Chapter 13

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Though the travel to the beech tree probably had been brief, we might as well have been traveling for half a day from how exhausted and shaken I felt.

And, of course, arriving to our destination didn't make me feel much better – my heart wanted to break seeing everyone gathered under that single tree. The anxiety in the was palpable, and nearly everyone was shivering and shaking from the cold, licking their paws that were now covered in mud.

It wasn't nearly as bad as seeing them all cramped under the Highledge, but nevertheless, not a sight for sore eyes.

And goodness gracious, were my eyes sore. My legs too. *I guess hanging on for dear life on a cliff will do that to you*.

And I knew that Thornclaw wasn't going to let that go for quite a while. "You are telling me that you nearly fell into the ravine from the top of the ridge?"

"Yes..." I admitted, wincing a little. "I was checking the camp one last time, and I slipped."

"Never check the camp again, please," he said immediately, his ears flattening.

"I hate to break it to you..."

"I know, I know," he cut in, sighing. "Just let me freak out for a moment."

"Oh, don't worry," I replied, managing a small purr. "We're freaking out together."

He chuckled and wrapped his tail around my shoulders. "I'm sure!" he purred as he stared at me worriedly. "Gosh, are you okay?"

"I will be..." I then meowed, my head shaking slowly. "I mean, I didn't fall."

"True. Thank StarClan." His eyes softened, and he looked at me more closely. "But... are you *okay?*"

I let out a breath, trying not to sound as weary as I felt. "Again, I will be."

"Fair enough," he murmured. He fell quiet for a moment, his pawsteps slowing beside mine. "You just... seem stressed."

I shrugged, snorted softly, and gestured toward the patrol ahead of us with a sweep of my tail. "Well..."

He shook his head and sniffed. "Well, of course. But... I don't know." He paused again, then shrugged, quieter this time. "I guess I've known you for a little while and... I can just tell when something... a little *extra* is bothering you."

My mate then nearly came to a stop, his gaze full of concern now. "...Like it has been lately."

I could only stare back at Thornclaw – almost in disbelief – for a moment. It still baffled me sometimes just how well Thornclaw could read me.

And, I mean, he was right – sure, of course I was stressed that I'd nearly crashed to the ravine floor.

But... something else had happened too. Clearly, Thornclaw could tell.

And as I recalled this once again, my stomach seemed to drop and my heart began to race as images from earlier began to resurface.

I suddenly had been beamed back to just over a moon ago... dangling above that rushing water, and simply being at Ashfur's disposal. *Gosh,* it had felt so real in the moment. So stupidly real.

Why did it have to happen in a moment where I literally could not afford to be brought down by things like this?

I then gave a shake of my head, trying ruthlessly to push down all of my frustrations. One pawstep at a time... I tried to remind myself. I will have to keep ignoring them.

I then flicked my tail dismissively at my mate. "Something extra..." I repeated. "It's not important."

Thornclaw sighed, and I could hear the weight behind it. "Lilypetal..."

"It was just another little flashback," I told the golden brown tabby tom, giving him a quick nod before he could press further. "I just have to go on. I can do it."

I then forced myself to take a deep breath. "Right now, I have to make sure that everyone else is okay."

I then leaned forward and touched my nose to Thornclaw's, trying to offer a look that was both reassuring and apologetic. "And thank StarClan you're okay," I then meowed softly to him before beginning to pad away. "I'll see you in a little while."

And as I had expected, I could hear Thornclaw letting out a long, deep sigh from behind me as I turned around, and now I found that I was trying with all of my might to push down my guilt.

But this was what I had to do – I didn't want to worry Thornclaw about this anymore, and I figured that I'd only be making the situation worse by telling him all about it.

After all, I couldn't muddle through all of it if I did.

And that was what I was going to do.

Once I had made some distance between myself and the rest of ThunderClan, I narrowed my eyes, scanning through the crowd of cats.

Of course, I couldn't help but go straight to my kits first. Thank

StarClan, all three of them were in one piece – Wrenfeather, along with Molewhisker, seemed to be wandering amongst the crowd trying to find their sleeping spots, and Lightningstrike and Emberheart, along with Cherryfall, appeared to be helping the apprentices gather moss that was accessible under the tree.

I then let out a purr of amusement as Wrenfeather and Molewhisker padded up to meet my two other kits, and while their dialogue wasn't within earshot, I saw Emberheart roll her eyes and then proceed to gently shove some of her moss in Wrenfeather's face.

And Wrenfeather was pawing the moss back at her by the time I made it to my three youngest kits. "Okay," I said, fixing my kits with a mock-stern look, "I get that these are trying times, but I don't think that shoving moss in each other's eyes is the way to cope."

Wrenfeather gave a snort and gently tossed the moss back at Emberheart. "Tell that to your daughter! All I asked was if I could have some moss for the nest I was making."

"And apparently," Lightningstrike chimed in, lounging with exaggerated offense, "you should feel forever guilty."

"He should!" Emberheart huffed. She then nodded to her dark tabby brother. "Just wait until we gather some more for everyone."

"Fine," Wrenfeather muttered, though there wasn't much bite in it.

"You are very patient, Wren," I said with a slight nod, amused despite myself. I glanced between all three of them. "Well, thank you both for doing that, either way." Then my voice softened. "Are you all doing okay?"

None of them verbally answered at first, only sighing, shrugging, and giving weak nods.

Emberheart's gaze was flicking back and forth between her brothers. "Okay as we can be right now, I guess," she finally said.

"Right?" Lightningstrike added. "This is *sooo* weird."

Then Emberheart's eyes hazel eyes widened. "Mother, you were one

of the last to leave, weren't you?"

"Oh yeah!" Lightningstrike's ears perked. "How did it look when you left?"

I let out a sigh. "It was filling up quite a bit with water, unfortunately."

Emberheart blinked. "How bad was it?"

My heart was already beginning to race. "Goodness, definitely not livable," I said, shaking my head.

"Do you think we'll be able to go back soon?" she asked, her voice rising slightly.

I hesitated, pawing at the damp earth. "Well..."

"Are we staying under this beech tree while we wait?" Lightningstrike asked, wide-eyed.

"Guys!" Wrenfeather cut in, rolling his eyes. "Give her a break! She's deputy, not all-knowing."

"Right..." Emberheart ducked her head, looking guilty. "Sorry."

"That's okay, sweetheart," I reassured her gently, although I was having to shake off my stress just a bit. "Questions are completely understandable right now."

Lightningstrike leaned forward a bit. "Well, I have a question that maybe won't make your head explode."

"Try me," I said with a smirk.

"Have you seen Snowstorm anywhere?" His yellow eyes looked suddenly worried. "She made it out of camp, right?"

I tilted my head, studying him. "Yes, she made it out! I remember she went behind Poppyfrost and Berrynose." I began to glance around, flicking my ears as I scanned the makeshift clearing. "And she's around here somewhere."

Then a wave of responsibility hit me, and I felt my heart drop. "Gosh, what am I doing? I should be making sure that her and everyone else is accounted for!" *Why have I been hanging around for so long?*

I leaned down and touched my nose to each of their foreheads. "I love you all. Let me know if you need anything."

"Love you too!" Emberheart purred.

"Will do," Wrenfeather added.

"The same goes for you too, you know," Lightningstrike said softly to me, his eyes warm but stern.

I looked at him gratefully. "Thank you."

And after one last warm look at my youngest kits, I padded off to the outside of the crowd once again, ignoring the light rain falling on my pelt.

And ignoring the voice in my head beating me up for not doing my job as promptly.

And as I did an initial sweep over the entirety of ThunderClan, I found I could still slightly hear the conversation that my kits were having:

"Lightningstrike, you are not subtle at all," Emberheart sighed.

"Subtle?" Lightningstrike repeated. "Subtle about what?"

"Oh, please!" Wrenfeather then groaned.

"What?" Lightningstrike then pressed.

"Nothing!" Emberheart then purred. "Nothing at all..."

I couldn't help but sniff with amusement at the conversation, as well as the situation. *Oh goodness, I guess we're getting to* that *time in our kits' lives... they're getting older,* I realized, not sure if that thought made me feel pleased or scared. After all, this was one of many

signs I'd seen of... *interest* on Lightningstrike's end.

And listen, I could be certain that my son would treat Snowstorm incredibly well if that ever worked out. *And... I can't help but pray to StarClan that his love life will be a little less rocky than it was with my first litter of kits...*

I then gave a shake of my head, telling myself that I *really* needed to focus. It was time to go through the entire Clan...

And time for another speedrun.

Bramblestar was here, Squirrelflight was with him... other warriors – *Graystripe, Dustpelt, Sandstorm, Brackenfur...*

I then narrowed my eyes, nodding my head with each cat that I was able to spot. *...Spiderleg, Mousewhisker, Cinderheart, Rosepetal, Dovewing, Ivypool...*

I let out a sigh of relief as every warrior seemed to be at the beech tree. Apprentices next – *Amberpaw, Dewpaw, Snowpaw, Seedpaw...*

I then flicked my ears in surprise when I couldn't immediately see my own apprentice. But I luckily just had to peer a bit past Seedpaw to see the smaller tortoiseshell she-cat. *Thank StarClan! I don't know what I would do if I lost my first apprentice this way... let alone my apprentice with my namesake.*

I then did one last sweep, checking that Daisy and Purdy had also made it before making my way to the crowd towards Bramblestar, who was sitting next to the trunk of the beech tree with Squirrelflight, to give him the all-good.

The moon was actually beginning to rise by the time I was able to do so. And I wasn't surprised; I'd said it before and I'll say it again – ThunderClan was annoyingly massive.

Anyway, speedrun over. "Alright, Bramblestar, I just went through and made sure that everyone is here." I then looked over my shoulder for a moment, almost as if to double-check, and then nodded back to the ThunderClan leader. "...Everyone is here."

I then was surprised to see Bramblestar's amber eyes widen. "You already went through and checked in with everyone? Great StarClan," he meowed as his head began to shake slowly. "I almost forgot to ask you to do that!"

I gave the leader a reassuring look. "My goodness, that's okay! You were the last one to leave camp and saw everyone else leave, so you probably didn't think to!"

Squirrelflight then let out a humored sniff, looking affectionately down at her mate. "I'll still give you grief about it for fun, if you'd like."

Bramblestar cocked a single eyebrow back at the dark ginger she-cat, and though he looked annoyed, his eyes also glowed with affection. "I wouldn't," he then muttered before nodding gratefully to me. "Thank you so much for doing that, Lilypetal. And since everyone is here..."

I then watched as Bramblestar got to his paws, letting out a yowl that managed to overpower all of the chatter and the rain that had now returned to a bit of a downpour. He then began to speak as soon as all of the meows had died down. "Alright, everyone – I know this situation is not ideal, but we're probably going to be staying under here until the storm passes."

"And what's going to happen *after* the storm passes?" I heard Dustpelt call out.

Bramblestar closed his eyes for a moment, letting out a sigh. "Unfortunately, all I can say is that we'll have to see what the situation is in the morning," he answered, sounding exasperated. "For now, everyone try to get some sleep while you can."

Waves of nods, groans and grunts were the only response to Bramblestar's words, and as the apprentices, Cherryfall, Emberheart, and Lightningstrike continued to distribute moss, cats slowly began to settle down for the night. We were definitely going to be getting a little cozy together tonight, but hopefully my Clanmates prefer getting close to each other and being a little uncomfy rather than getting soaked... and a little angry.

"Try and get some sleep while you can..."

I let out a small purr, turning around and feeling a wave of warmth as I saw Thornclaw standing behind me, his pale blue eyes teasing. "Lilypetal, I hope you know that that command goes for you too."

I closed my eyes, still purring as I gave a small nod. "Yes... yes, yes, yes," I breathed, padding up to meet Thornclaw and leaning my head into his shoulder as we began to make our way through our cluster of Clanmates.

And as we continued to travel, and the more that I seemed to sink into Thornclaw, the more that I was realizing that my fatigue was hitting right in this moment – the adrenaline and anxiety of the day finally beginning to fade. "Well, goodness, I think I could fall asleep on you right here..." I purred, my muzzle deep into my mate's fur.

I heard Thornclaw let out a chuckle, and I felt his pace begin to slow. "And you know I would be more than okay with that... if I hadn't made us a nest that was just a few tail-lengths away."

"Oh! A nest!" I then meowed, moving my head so that I could now see what was in front of me – sure enough, a moss nest that had been put together in between a few large beech tree roots. "A nest works too!"

Thornclaw let out another purr, giving me a lick on the head. "I'm glad."

"And you'll be in the nest too, right?"

"I plan on it."

Thornclaw then let me step ahead of him, allowing me to get settled first and adjust the moss as needed, that kind soul. Just a bit away, closer to the tree trunk, Goldenshine and Dustystorm appeared to have made their nest, and Dustystorm was shoving in the last patch of moss as Goldenshine spun around a few times and then settled down.

Our daughter noticed us as we had padded over, giving the two of us a nod. "Just another casual day here in ThunderClan, huh?" she

then meowed dryly. "We just love each other so much that we want to squish together under a tree."

"Oh, yeah!" Dustystorm added, shaking out his pelt and his tone heavy with sarcasm. "And our fur should be wet too—that makes it *much* more fun."

I purred, exchanging a humored glance with Thornclaw. "Not too fond of this quantity of rain, Dustystorm?"

He gave me a deadpan look. "I'm embarrassed to admit it, but yes. The last time I was this wet was when my Twolegs made me take a bath."

"Ew!" Goldenshine groaned.

"Ew?" Thornclaw echoed with mock horror. "You think cleaning yourself is gross? No wonder I've always thought you were a little stinky."

"Hilarious!" Goldenshine shot back.

"I try," he said, smirking.

I flicked his ear. "You do *try*."

Thornclaw shot me a feigned look of offense, and I met it with a loving glance before turning back to Dustystorm. "But you're right—this definitely gives me flashbacks." *All kinds of flashbacks...*

Goldenshine sighed as Dustystorm settled in beside her. "Can't wait to see everyone's reaction at the next Gathering when we tell them ThunderClan's camp is a *pond*."

My ears flicked at the realization, and I let out a groan. "Ugh, that's right! I didn't even think about having to share that with the other Clans..."

"We don't have to word it like that," Goldenshine muttered.

I shot her a pointed look. "Aware. Still... how do we even give news like that?" I turned to Thornclaw, worry tightening my voice. "What

are they going to think... or *do?*"

He gave me a sympathetic look and brushed his tail gently along my neck. "All valid questions..." he meowed to me calmly, "that can wait for another day, Lilypetal."

I let out another breath. "Okay..." And when Thornclaw used his tail to draw my head back into the warmth of his flank, I echoed more quietly, "Okay."

"We maybe won't even have much to tell them by the time the next Gathering comes," Dustystorm said, his tone hopeful. "Hopefully this will all clear out by then!"

I gave my daughter's mate an appreciative look, but I quickly grew concerned as the dusty gray tom seemed to look off, his pale blue eyes darkening. "Speaking of..." he then murmured, and I wondered if I was supposed to hear it. "Someone's trying to clear out right now..."

"Huh?" Goldenshine followed his gaze, and I was shocked to see that they were looking off at Nightwing, who was padding away from everyone else and into the forest. "Are you freaking kidding me?" Goldenshine then hissed.

My eyes then narrowed as Dustystorm and Goldenshine both stood up and began to pad up to the she-cat. "Is everything okay?" I couldn't help but ask.

Both of the younger cats stopped in their tracks, both of them looking back at me with wide eyes. "Oh, everything's good!" Goldenshine answered in a surprisingly chipper tone. "Just seeing where Nightwing is off to!"

The two of them then practically broke into a run, seemingly trying to catch up to their Clanmate as quickly as possible. Once they caught up to Nightwing, her green eyes flashed with surprise. And while I couldn't hear their conversation – the black she-cat's tense demeanor and Goldenshine's and Dustystorm's sharp gazes told me that it wasn't a lighthearted situation.

My eyes managed to narrow even more as I looked off at the three cats. "Hm. Interesting," I then murmured.

"Very interesting indeed," Thornclaw echoed beside me. "Any idea what that's about?"

"Absolutely none!" I admitted, my tail twitching slightly, and worry tugging at me. "Hm... I wonder if I should stay up a bit and make sure they're okay?"

"I wonder if I should counter that," he said sharply, yet warmly to me. I couldn't help the amused purr that slipped from my throat, followed by a soft sigh. "I'll stay awake a little longer and make sure everything's fine over there. Lilypetal, I really want you to get some rest."

I let out a quiet snort—barely audible. That is... if I could even rest at all. Part of me was almost fine staying up a bit longer - maybe it would mean one less nightmare. One less moment where Ashfur's claws came crashing into me.

But I knew Thornclaw. He'd never, ever let up. "I should sleep..." I admitted softly, dread already churning in my stomach at the thought. "And after today, maybe tomorrow is just what I need."

Thornclaw gave me a single nod, his pale blue eyes full of relief. "Absolutely," he meowed, his eyes watching me carefully as I leaned into him, sighing as I dug my muzzle into his fur again. Without hesitation, he wrapped his tail around my flank and pulled me closer.

"And Lilypetal..." he added, his voice lower, more pointed, "if you wake up in the middle of the night... or have another one of your nightmares, don't be afraid to tell me."

That had sounded quite pointed.

I felt my stomach twist with guilt all over again. I hated, *hated* that I had blown off my last incident to Thornclaw... "Of course," I still whispered as I snuggled even closer to my mate. "Goodnight, Thornclaw. I love you."

"I love you too, Lilypetal."

I then took a deep breath, forcing myself to close my eyes. And almost immediately, I could feel my body trying to pull me into sleep.

I mean, that wasn't new. *Falling asleep* was never the problem, I suppose.

Staying asleep was, and like every night, I had a feeling – especially after today, and after what had been... *reignited* – I wasn't going to sleep very well at all.

~>~>~>~>~

And I didn't.

Seemingly almost immediately after I'd gone to sleep, it felt like I was teleported back to that cliff.

Not the cliff above the camp ravine, no, but that same stupid one above the waterfall where Ashfur had stood over me.

And guess what? There he was.

A chill ran down my spine as Ashfur stood above me, calm as ever, his blue eyes shining with that awful, delighted malice. "You've put up quite a fight," he said, his voice smooth and almost amused. His voice echoing through the forest in a strange, booming way, confirming for me that this wasn't real.

But nevertheless, I felt just as helpless and full of dread as I would if it were real.

I forced one paw forward, digging my claws in deeper. "What else am I supposed to do?" I growled through gritted teeth.

He just shrugged, like this was a casual conversation and not me dangling for my life. "It's quite admirable, actually. You are definitely a cat to be admired, Lilypetal. I have to admit—I even admired you when you first came to the Clans. You've always had so much spirit. So much determination."

I wanted to scream at him. To spit in his face. But I didn't have the strength.

He stopped pacing. Stared straight down at me. "Too much for your own good," he whispered. His voice was low now, cruel and certain.

"Especially if you think you have even a *chance* of winning against me."

And suddenly as if I was experiencing this for the first time, my entire body seemed to freeze with fear as Ashfur lifted up a paw, the claws on it large and unsheathed. I then let out a yowl of complete fear as he let it come down and crash into my flank.

But for some reason, when he made contact, the claws weren't unsheathed.

And suddenly, I jerked awake, the rising sun practically blinding me as my eyes flew open. My breath came fast and shallow, my fur felt bristled, and my heart thundered in my chest.

"Lilypetal?"

I flinched at the sound, instinctively scrambling upright. But it wasn't Ashfur looming over me - it was Lilypaw. Her eyes were wide, her ears tilted slightly back in concern, like she wasn't sure if she'd done something wrong. "I'm so sorry! Did I scare you?"

I sighed with relief, slowly shaking my head and slowly coming back down to earth. "We all need to be startled every once in a while," I murmured, still blinking the fog of sleep from my eyes. "It wakes me up a little faster!"

Lilypaw purred with amusement. "True!"

"Is everything okay?" I asked, flicking my ears forward. Then it hit me. "Oh goodness—were you wanting to train this morning?" I groaned and slapped my tail over my head. "Shoot, I haven't even made up a plan—"

Lilypaw giggled and shook her head. "Oh, no! Don't worry, Lilypetal. Bramblestar told me we're holding off on training for

now... unfortunately." We exchanged a warm, humored glance, before my apprentice went on. "But he actually told me to come and get you! He wants you to join a patrol that's going out to survey the flood damage."

I couldn't help but sigh again, closing my eyes as dread tightened in my stomach. "Oh, no..." I breathed. "Who knows what we're going to discover out there?"

Lilypaw practically bounced. "And you'd better make sure to tell me all about whatever it is! I'm so jealous!"

"Don't worry—I'll tell you every detail once we get back." I paused, glancing around. Most of the Clan was still asleep beneath the thick branches of the beech tree. "Hold on... Lilypaw, why are you even awake if you aren't on this patrol?"

"Oh, I've only *been* awake!" she chirped, beaming. "I was too excited to sleep. That evacuation was so neat! And now we get to sleep under a beech tree."

I shook my head back at the younger she-cat in amazement. "Well, others do—not you, apparently!" I teased, and we both purred. "Well, thank you for being awake and helping Bramblestar deliver the news."

"You're welcome!" Lilypaw squealed. She then looked down at Thornclaw, still sleeping beside me, and her eyes lit with mischief. "Oh! Thornclaw is on the patrol too, but I figured you'd want to wake him up yourself."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You are way too young to be making jokes like that."

She giggled again as I flicked her ear with my tail. "After you're done with Bramblestar's orders, try and get some rest! I promise it'll catch up to you later, and you won't be able to hear my report!"

Lilypaw sighed and rolled her eyes in mock defeat. "Oh, alright!" She touched her nose to mine. "I'll see you, Lilypetal!"

"Bye!" I called softly, watching her bounce away.

I then stood there for a moment after Lilypaw padded off, her pawsteps fading into the early morning quiet. The golden light was warm on my back, but it didn't sink into my bones the way it should've. And while the conversation with Lilypaw had distracted me and cheered me up just a little, I still felt incredibly shaken. My paws still felt cold. My heart still felt like it had been wrung out and left somewhere on that cliff.

Goodness gracious, every time I started to think I'd moved on, something yanked me backward by the scruff. And I *hated* it. I hated how helpless it made me feel. Like I was still there, still fighting for my life, when all I wanted was to be *here*. To try my darndest to be even a *little* worthwhile as a deputy.

But how could I do that when these scary images and thoughts were constantly rammed inside of my head. Words that Ashfur said to me lingered...

You've always had so much spirit. So much determination. Too much for your own good. Especially if you think you have even a chance of winning against me.

A chill ran down my spine as those words echoed in my head. *Even though he's gone... even if we defeated him... why does it feel like he's still winning?*

I then let out a long sigh, bringing myself to give a quick shake of my head. *Forget it,* I then told myself. *We've got a forest to survey.* I then looked down at my mate, not being able to help looking down at his adorable sleeping figure for a moment before I bent my head down and gently prodded at his cheek with my muzzle.

"Good morning, my love," I murmured softly in my mate's ear. "You've been summoned."

He grunted, beginning to stir, and my heart flipped as his piercing blue eyes opened and locked onto mine. "Summoned, huh?" he mumbled, his eyes gleaming. "Is it to the really pretty she-cat land? Looks like I'm already there."

I purred, touched despite everything. "Sweet, but no. You've been

personally selected for Bramblestar's Flooded Mess patrol."

Thornclaw rolled over and stretched. "Wow, I've been holding out for that one!" he then meowed dryly. "Are you on it too?"

I sighed, flashing him a slightly worried look. "Oh, of course!"

"Even better," he said, rising to his paws. He then gazed at me tenderly and put his tail on my shoulder. "And don't worry—we can deal with whatever we will find."

I gave a sigh, nodding once again, and I was then surprised as I noticed Thornclaw observing me closely. His expression shifted, and suddenly his eyes darkened with worry. "You didn't sleep well," he said gently. The teasing had left his voice, but the warmth remained.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Are we surprised?"

He sighed. "No, but..." He then shook his head before fixing his gaze on me again. "Did you have another nightmare?"

"Maybe I did," I admitted, my heart beginning to race with panic. "But it's not a big deal!"

"Lilypetal," Thornclaw meowed, his tone firm but concerned, "you used to act like they were a big deal, and now you're blowing them off—nightmares, things you experience during the day—like they're nothing."

"They are!" I insisted. "They are because I want them to be. They *have* to be."

He shook his head slightly, not arguing, just looking at me with soft frustration. "Lilypetal, I can see on your face that whatever you dreamt last night... and *something* that you saw yesterday... is still bothering you."

I sighed heavily. "And maybe it is!" I then gave a dismissive flick of my tail. "But Thornclaw, we don't have time to unpack my subconscious this morning. Bramblestar is waiting for us!"

Thornclaw's eyes narrowed, and his gaze was sharp. "Lilypetal, believe it or not, sometimes even Bramblestar can wait if it means making sure that you're okay."

"I *am* okay," I said firmly. "I promise. And if—"

"—and if you're not okay, you will be," he finished for me, his eyes rolling. "I know." He sighed, stepping beside me. "Alright, Lils, I hear what you're saying."

We began to pad together toward where the rest of the patrol was gathering, and as we walked, I heard him mutter under his breath, "I just am not sure if I *like* what you're saying..."

I glanced worriedly back at him. "Fair enough."

Thornclaw and I continued to walk side by side toward the patrol, paws squelching in the damp earth as early sunlight filtered weakly through the leaves above. Just ahead, Whitewing stood near Bramblestar, stretching her legs and flicking her ears against a buzzing gnat. "Good morning, you two!"

I ran up to touch noses with one of my closest friends. "Good morning, Whitewing!"

Thornclaw let out an amused snort next to me, taking a moment to scan his surroundings before nodding back at Whitewing. "I think I'll just give you a '*morning*' in return, if that's okay."

Whitewing let out a small purr. "Oh, more than okay!" she then meowed.

Bramblestar let out a small purr as well as he turned to us. The ThunderClan leader looked tired—his fur unkempt – I can't imagine that I looked much different. His eyes were also lined with stress, however, they looked focused.

"Thank you all for coming," he said with a nod. "We've got a *lot* to check."

I let out a long sigh, exchanging a look with both Thornclaw and Whitewing. "Oh goodness, looking forward to it!" I tried to meow

lightheartedly. "Who else is coming?"

"Dovewing and Ivypool are joining us, and myself," Bramblestar replied, sweeping his tail to motion toward the two she-cats, who were just padding up to join the rest of us. "We'll start by heading through the forest to check the damage. We'll then make our way to camp. And..."

The ThunderClan leader trailed off for a moment to let out a sigh. "...Last and *least* – we'll check the lake."

I gave Bramblestar a short, wry smirk. "Let's just hope we don't need one of those Twoleg monsters that floats on the water."

Bramblestar thankfully let out a quiet purr in response. He then proceeded to scan over our patrol, checking that all of us were here, before flicking his tail forward and leading us into the forest.

Oh goodness gracious, here we go.

We set off, paws sinking into the already-torn earth beneath us.

The forest was a *wreck*. Trees that had once stood strong and proud now leaned at uncomfortable angles, roots clawing through churned mud like they were trying to escape the water. Leaves hung heavy with moisture, some drooping low enough to brush our backs, while debris tangled itself around our legs - twigs, moss, scraps of soaked bedding from the dens, even a half-submerged dead squirrel floating past, and worst of all... it probably wasn't edible.

Oh, no...

I heard Dovewing let out a discouraged sigh behind me. "This is... worse than I thought," she murmured.

Ivypool flicked her tail sharply. "You mean worse than any of us thought."

Whitewing stepped carefully over a broken branch, glancing back at me and Thornclaw. "Remember when the biggest threat we had to face was badgers? I miss badgers."

"I haven't even experienced badgers yet, and I think I miss them too!" I purred to the white she-cat. "I can probably assume they don't destroy the entire forest when they visit."

My heart then began to sink as we neared camp – there was a small part of me that hoped that the severe damage would stop the closer that we got... but that sadly wasn't proving to be true.

I could practically *feel* the dread also spreading between the entire patrol.

And by the time that the stone hollow, or what was *left* of it came into sight, that dread seemed to abruptly be overtaken by complete dismay.

Though my head felt foggy now, I could hear Thornclaw let out a huff beside me. "You know, even if badgers could destroy an entire forest, they wouldn't have to worry about ours," he murmured to us. "Ours seems to be taken care of already."

We were all speechless after that. We all felt the weight hit our chests the moment we crested the ridge above the hollow.

Our camp was barely even there anymore.

Water had pooled in thick, swirling patches across the floor of the hollow, the murky brown liquid tugging at what was left of the dens. The Highledge had nearly disappeared beneath the flood, its once-proud shape now swallowed by the earth. The apprentices' den had completely collapsed in on itself, and all that remained of the nursery was a soggy heap of brambles clinging to the edges of the camp wall.

"Great StarClan," Dovewing whispered.

I didn't speak. I couldn't. My tongue felt *stuck* to the roof of my mouth. My heart thudded in my ears. I felt Thornclaw's pelt press gently into mine, but I didn't lean in.

I couldn't.

I just stared at what had once been home. *No...*

I stared down at it all, my stomach a knot. No words would flow through my jaws. I could feel the weight of it pressing into my chest like water-filled moss.

And as I thought they would, my thoughts spiraled - cats I'd helped guide out, dens we'd left behind, our Clan now nothing more than sludge and rubble. I should've done more. I should've seen this coming sooner. I should've -

"Listen," Bramblestar said behind me, his voice rough, but steady.

I turned to look at him. He was standing near the edge of the hollow, his amber eyes dark as he stared down. "We'll rebuild," he said firmly. "ThunderClan has survived worse. StarClan willing, we'll survive this too. The forest may not look like home right now, but that doesn't mean we've lost it. Not completely."

His words were hopeful in structure, I suppose, but I could see the strain in his eyes. None of us believed that this was over. Not by a long stretch.

Bramblestar then let out a long, shaky sigh. "We need to check the lake," he went on. "Get a sense of what we're really dealing with."

He started down the slope again, with Dovewing and Ivypool silently falling in beside him.

The rest of us didn't move right away.

Whitewing, Thornclaw, and I remained rooted in place, still staring down into the shattered remains of our home.

Whitewing's head was shaking slowly beside me. "I don't even know where I'd start," she then murmured.

I swallowed hard. My paws felt heavier than stone. However, I eventually forced myself to speak. "We should catch up," I said eventually, though it barely came out above a whisper.

Whitewing nodded. Thornclaw brushed his flank against mine briefly, and we began to move, trailing behind the others.

The forest didn't improve as we went on. Shocker. If anything, it felt worse. Entire trails had been washed out, and the landmarks we usually relied on had become nearly unrecognizable. Mud seemed to suck at our paws with every step.

I then saw Thornclaw's ears flick beside me. "Careful," Thornclaw murmured, pushing aside a branch so it wouldn't hit me. His voice was gentle, but I could still hear the weight behind it. He was trying so hard not to hover.

We continued like that, the three of us winding carefully through what used to be familiar terrain – going through a terrible cycle of seeing the rubble, feeling heartbroken, trying to convince ourselves it was salvageable, seeing more rubble...

Then, Bramblestar's voice called back from the trees ahead:

"Lilypetal! Thornclaw! Whitewing! You'll want to see this."

We exchanged glances. I almost didn't want to move.

But together, we climbed the narrow rise that led to the overlook.

And then we saw it.

The lake.

Only it didn't look like the lake anymore.

Before I had fully even processed it all, I couldn't help but breath, "Oh my gosh..."

What had once been the center of the Clan territories now looked more like a massive puddle of... *chaos* - an endless sprawl of dirty, fast-moving water that surged right up to the tree line. The Gathering island was completely drowned, the tops of its trees barely visible. Bits of driftwood, entire branches, and shredded nests floated across the surface, pulled along by a current that had no business existing in what had once been a calm lake.

It was terrifying.

There was no clear shore. No path.

Only water.

Whitewing stepped closer, her voice hushed. "How do we come back from this?"

Thornclaw didn't answer. Instead, I felt his tail wrap around my shoulders once again.

I didn't say anything.

I didn't have the energy to hope or plan or lead right now.

Because everything I'd worked to control, to bury, to move on from - the nightmares, the flashbacks... was flooding back, too. Every moment like this just kept cracking the surface wider.

And staring out over that monstrous lake, all I could think was:

This is just the thing to maintain my insanity right now.

Chapter 14

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

Well, I guess we finally able to leave that StarClan-cursed beech tree... but not to return back to the ThunderClan camp.

That's too easy! Instead, ThunderClan decided to make a temporary camp inside of the tunnels while we waited for the flooding to go down – the tunnels that served as a passageway between ThunderClan and WindClan territory.

Somehow, we had already managed to stay down here for a few sunrises, and luckily there hadn't been a lot of cats yet that had slipped on the slick cave floor, or accidently bonked their head into a cave wall.

And luckily for me, I actually knew these tunnels pretty well. Sure, it had only been for a night, but I still vividly remembered being stuck in these same tunnels with Hollyleaf when I was still an apprentice. I still stand by my choice to jump in after the fluffy back she-cat as stones from the tunnel roof began to collapse on top of her, and it led to a neat night of talking to a she-cat that I had looked up to so much, *and* I got to explore these caves *thoroughly*.

However, I guess taking shelter in these tunnels after your camp is flooded isn't as neat, but I was thankful that we'd found a place to stay that was safe, and at least somewhat dry.

And we were trying to make it feel like home as best as we could. We'd spent our first couple of days here salvaging any possible plants, brambles, and sticks we could use for dens, and today was the day we were finally able to attempt and build those dens.

Dustystorm, Nightwing, and I had been given the task of putting together the apprentices den. Dustystorm and I were actually assembling the den while Nightwing was going back and forth

bringing us supplies from a big pile.

While she genuinely was being helpful to us, I had a hunch that the black she-cat had picked her task... strategically. "Alright, I tried to pick some of the thickest brambles I could find!" she said to us brightly. "I figured they'd be good for the base of the den."

I gave her a warm nod. "Thanks, Nightwing! Do you want to help us start building that up?"

She shook her head quickly, already turning away. "Oh, that's okay! I'll go ahead and start gathering up another pile to bring to you all!"

Dustystorm exchanged a glance with me, his brow raised. "Already? It'll be a while before we need more – this is a big pile."

"Then I'll just start making another big pile!" Nightwing called over her shoulder. "That'll take up a lot of time."

I started to object, trying to catch her before she left. "But–"

"I'll see you all in a bit!" she meowed quickly, already trotting away.

I stared off at the she-cat in disbelief as she then immediately whipped herself around, quickly padding off to the big supplies pile at the other side of the cave. And as I then looked back at Dustystorm, his pale blue eyes reflected exactly everything that I was feeling.

That could be summed up with – how in the name of StarClan did Nightwing think she was getting away with this? Her continued evasiveness was not getting us off her back in the way she thought it was.

Did Dustystorm or I figure out *what* she was being evasive about? No.

But I guess the two of us could assume that it was something pretty important, considering Nightwing had tried to *sneak away from her Clanmates* just moments after ThunderClan had escaped the flooded camp and had taken shelter under the beech tree. Did she not care about the flooding or what other parts of the territory looked like

and how dangerous it could be? Did she not care about how selfish that would look to leave her Clan at a time like that?

Thank StarClan we'd been able to steer her back... *that time*, but we weren't with her constantly – who's to say she hadn't snuck out since then?

Dustystorm and I had already stewed it over for a while, but... I guess there wasn't much else we could stew about. We knew she was sneaking out, we just didn't know why.

And unfortunately, just as I had been telling myself for the last several days, now wasn't the time to try and figure that out.

But by the time that Nightwing made a second round over to us, it was clear to me that Dustystorm had a different plan. "Thanks!" he said with a small nod. "So, I bet you've been feeling pretty antsy, huh?"

Nightwing blinked at him. "Antsy?"

"Well, yeah!" Dustystorm replied. "I mean, with how much you've been leaving camp lately, I can imagine it's overwhelming being cooped up in this cave."

Nightwing shifted her paws, avoiding our gazes. "I guess."

Dustystorm's tone stayed light, hopeful. "Maybe one day when the flooding calms down you, Goldenshine and I can go and explore! And you could–"

"Yeah, maybe!" Nightwing cut in quickly, already turning away from both of us. "I'm going to grab more brambles! You're going through them fast!"

"Okay..." Dustystorm trailed off, watching as Nightwing slipped away again. Then he turned to look at me, confusion tightening his expression. "I wasn't trying to interrogate her... completely! Why did she leave?"

I let out a quiet sigh, my eyes fixed on the brambles I was weaving beneath my paws. "When you're keeping a secret, anything anyone

says to you feels like an interrogation."

Dustystorm gave me a knowing look, then returned his gaze to the pile of brambles he was working on. "Well geez, I worry that I'll never be able to talk to my sister again as long as she has this secret."

"One day we're going to get it out of her..." I murmured, my eyes drifting to where Nightwing was now just a distant shape. "...I just don't think it's going to be through asking her nicely..." *We're going to have to follow her again sometime... rain, storm or shine.*

I then flicked my ears, my gaze shifting over to the tunnel entrance – our only source of light down here – as I noticed Jayfeather and Leafpool walk through, leading a group of a few cats.

I couldn't make out the specific cats yet, but I cringed as I immediately recognized the stench of WindClan. *Uh, oh.*

I didn't avert my gaze, but gave Dustystorm a light prod on his shoulder with my tail. "A WindClan patrol is being brought into camp," I whispered to my mate.

And he immediately let out a groan, padding up to sit right beside me. "What more could they want from us?" he then whispered back to me. "They already pushed in their border so that they get the full stream!"

"I'm about to push them *out of here* so that they get the full Goldenshine vengeance treatment," I then muttered, causing Dustystorm to let out a quiet purr.

We then watched as the group of cats made their way deeper into the tunnels, and I was finally able to make out what WindClan cats had decided to have to audacity to make an appearance. First there was Nightcloud, then Hootpaw, then Heathertail...

And coming in right behind her... was Breezepelt.

My stomach flipped upside down.

My guess was that Dustystorm hadn't noticed this yet, and he

flicked my shoulder with his tail as he stood up. "This should be interesting. Want to get closer and check out what's going on?"

I quickly shook my head. "I'd rather not." When Dustystorm gave me a confused, concerned look, I simply nodded ahead towards the back of the patrol.

And as I had expected, my mate's pale blue eyes immediately narrowed and darkened, and he sat back down. "Understood," he then muttered, his tail beginning to twitch as he seemed to straighten his posture.

So, we both seemed to silently agree to watch from where we were as Jayfeather then led Bramblestar and Lilypetal over to the WindClan patrol. Both of the leaders stood calm and dignified, but I could especially tell from my mother that she was having to hold back her bitterness as Bramblestar spoke.

"Hi, there," the ThunderClan leader meowed evenly. "Jayfeather said you wanted to speak with us?"

"Yes," Nightcloud then meowed, briefly nodding back to the patrol behind her – which, of course, I was not looking over at in the slightest. "Onestar sent us to see how ThunderClan was doing. We know that the flood hit you all pretty hard."

I couldn't help but snort at that comment. *So hard that you felt like you had to spare us by taking our stream.* I thought to myself angrily. *They're probably just coming over to get an idea of what else they could try and take.*

I then watched as Bramblestar and Lilypetal exchanged a quick glance – one that wouldn't give away much to the WindClan patrol, but Dustystorm and I were trying not to purr knowing that the two brown tabbies were trying their best not to run to WindClan and shred Onestar to pieces.

The two then looked back to the patrol. "We're doing fine, thank you," Bramblestar then answered with a sigh. "It's not ideal, but the tunnels are just enough until the flooding goes down."

Then, as Nightcloud began to speak again, Dustystorm and I had to shift our attention as Night*wing* padded back up to us, her green eyes wary and reluctant. "Sorry to interrupt the eavesdropping, but... I think I need help carrying this next load. There are some bigger pieces that I think would work great for the apprentices den."

And, of course, before we could say anything else, she immediately whipped herself around and began to lead us across camp. Dustystorm and I exchanged an annoyed glance, almost simultaneously sighed, before beginning to catch up to her.

We slowed down as we arrived right behind her, and then was when I noticed the new sparkle of determination in my mate's eyes. "Anyway, as I was saying earlier, my sister..." Dustystorm murmured, causing me to suppress another purr, and... causing Nightwing to walk faster, "I hate that you're always going out by yourself. All of us seriously need to go out together someday. Why can't you take us with you?"

"Hey!" Nightwing then meowed, and I was surprised by how enthusiastic she sounded. "Weren't you all listening to the WindClan patrol? You wouldn't want to miss that encounter!"

"Maybe I'm missing encounters between me and you!" Dustystorm teased to Nightwing, and when she simply rolled her eyes and kept walking, my mate let out a sigh and looked back at me. "Okay, granted, that one was a *bit* of an interrogation."

"*Really?* I couldn't tell!" I purred back at the dusty brown tom before affectionately nuzzling his cheek with my muzzle.

And then, whether or not Pippy was trying to deter us, she was right – I was still immensely curious to hear the conversation that was being had between ThunderClan and WindClan.

And unfortunately, out of the corner of my eye, I saw what I had been trying to avoid since that WindClan patrol had brought their silly little tails into the tunnels.

Breezepelt, who was standing at the back of his patrol, was glancing

around the caves when I first noticed him, but almost as if he had *sensed* that my attention was now on him, his amber eyes seemed to land on my pelt.

And as usual, his eyes were dark, and full of so many different emotions – remorse, confusion, fear...?

Who knows? I hated it.

And you know what I hated even more? The fact that I was going to have to walk *right* past him from where the WindClan patrol now stood – these darn tight tunnels.

And as Dustystorm, Nightwing and I finished gathering our supplies, I led the way back to the apprentices den. I warily looked behind me to see that Dustystorm also seemed to be watching Breezepelt out of his peripheral – his eyebrows furrowed and his fur slightly bristled.

Then, to my surprise, he gently brushed past me, so that he was now leading our bramble-carrying line.

Oh, he'd clearly done this on purpose – he couldn't shield me from Breezepelt on our tight path, but was clearly trying to do everything in his power to assert his dominance and protect me from the WindClan tom.

But to my complete *annoyance*, his attempts weren't good enough.

Despite me doing a combination of looking in the opposite direction, trying my best to avoid all eye contact, and doing some major manifesting, as we walked quickly by the patrol, my heart sank as I heard a hissed whisper come from my left.

"Hey!" Breezepelt breathed practically into my ear. "We need to talk."

I immediately flicked my tail dismissively and continued walking. "No, we don't."

"Goldenshine, please!" Breezepelt then hissed, taking a few pawsteps forward to keep up with me. "For just a moment. The

patrol's going to be leaving soon!"

"Then you'd better be going with them," I then nearly growled as I quickened my pace. "*No*, I'm not talking to you, Breezepelt! I'm not stupid."

I then practically made a run for the apprentices den, of course not staying to hear if Breezepelt even responded. I didn't even remotely look back to see if he was still staring off.

However, that wasn't the case for Dustystorm at all – I obviously wasn't going to follow his gaze, but it was pretty clear to me that he was still staring worriedly off at Breezepelt. In a different world, I was certain that Nightwing probably would have been doing the same thing and would have pressed me with questions, but as I had predicted she would, she'd already dropped her brambles and had returned to the pile.

And as he dropped his own pile of brambles, I heard him let out a sigh. "I knew he was persistent. But seeing it like that..."

I blinked, watching as he seemed to try and find his words. "What do you mean?"

But before my mate could even answer, Bramblestar's voice then echoed down the tunnel.

"Could I have Snowstorm, Cherryfall and Swiftflight escort the WindClan patrol to their border?"

Foxdung. Mouse-dung. Hare-dung!

Bramblestar had chosen *Swiftlfight* to escort the WindClan patrol back to the border. Out of the *massive* Clan that we had, Swiftflight was one of the cats he had chosen. The thought made me want to rake my claws against the cave walls.

I mean, I knew that Bramblestar *never* would have done that if he knew the situation, but he didn't, and never *would*, so these were the sacrifices Swiftflight and I would have to make.

I turned and spotted Swiftflight next to the new warriors den. His

ears perked up at his name - then immediately flattened when he saw who he'd be escorting. Clearly, he hadn't even realized that WindClan, let alone *Breezepelt*, was here until this moment.

My son looked *mortified,* and my heart sank as I watched his face completely drop. Like, completely fell apart for a heartbeat before he put it back together, clenching his jaws and squaring his shoulders as he reluctantly began to pad over.

As he traveled, Snowstorm and Cherryfall joined him, both exchanging wary but encouraging glances his way. While Bramblestar's choice *clearly* hadn't been intentional, I couldn't believe that he'd happened to choose two of the only cats in this Clan that knew Swiftflight's situation. *Thank StarClan that he did.*

Swiftflight made his way over, quiet and stiff, and Breezepelt looked up just as he got close. I held my breath as their eyes met for a moment. Then Swiftflight broke away and positioned himself on the far side of the patrol, opposite Breezepelt, without saying a thing.

Good.

Breezepelt's eyes narrowed, from what I could see, and then let out a frustrated sigh as Swiftflight made it to his spot, while Snowstorm took the side that Breezepelt was on and Cherryfall took the rear.

And as all of them began to walk to the entrance of the tunnel, Swiftflight looked over his shoulder, immediately meeting my gaze.

I flashed him a sympathetic glance, my head shaking back and forth in amazement. "Good luck," I then mouthed to him.

He then nodded, barely, his gray-blue eyes full of dread, and disappeared out of the tunnel.

StarClan, be with him, please, I prayed to myself. *Gosh, I can't even imagine how that expedition is going to go.*

I took a deep breath, and I then looked to my side to find a very pensive Dustystorm. He was frowning, his head clearly full.

But I let out an amused sniff, trying to lighten the mood and get my mate out of his head. "Clearly Bramblestar doesn't realize the mistake he just made," I muttered aloud, my tail lashing. "Either Breezepelt or Swiftflight is going to return to their Clan looking like a shredded mess."

When Dustystorm did nothing but sniff, I pushed on. "Gosh, Swiftflight and I are being pushed into situations with Breezepelt way more often than I'd like."

"*Pushed* into situations?" Dustystorm finally echoed, to my surprise. "It sure seems like Breezepelt is *putting* himself into them."

I narrowed my eyes at my mate, letting out a snort. "I don't think Breezepelt magically took over Bramblestar's body and got him to pick Swiftflight to escort him out."

Dustystorm snorted. "I wouldn't put it past him." He then gave a shake of his head. "Anyway, I heard him just now – it was his own free will to ask to talk to you."

My heart then seemed to skip a beat as I watched him take a deep breath. "And if I'm being honest, Goldenshine..." he then continued, "...I didn't like that at all."

I flicked my ears. "I didn't either!" I replied quickly. I then shrugged and looked teasingly at Dustystorm. "And I turned him down cold, didn't I? Thought I was pretty impressive, honestly."

"Yeah. You were!" he reassured me. He then nervously shifted his paws back and forth. "That's not the part that's bothering me."

I stared curiously back at him. "Okay..."

Dustystorm paused, eyes searching mine. "I've been trying to ignore it. Telling myself I trust you — and I do! But... every time you tell me another thing he's done, or said... I don't know. It's getting harder to just sit with it." He then looked at me reassuringly. "I'm *not* going to rip him to shreds, that hasn't changed, but... I'm getting really uncomfortable with it, I guess."

"Well, sure, you are!" I said, also reassuring the dusty gray tom. "We

both know everything that he's done. I'm uncomfortable too – I thought that's been established."

I then blinked in confusion. "But... I've rejected every advance he's made, Dustystorm, and I'm not hiding anything extra from you." I then sniffed with amusement. "I'm not your sister."

He snorted, briefly flashing me a humored glance. "I know. That's not what I'm saying." He then sighed. "It's just... it's one thing hearing about it. But seeing him look at you like that. Hearing him ask to talk to you... It's different when you're standing right there."

I had to let out a sigh, now processing the fact that Dustystorm had probably heard everything. Not that he wasn't allowed to, but that explained his behavior for sure, and I hated to see him so distressed. *But... why does he seem* this *distressed*? "That totally makes sense, but... I said no, remember?" I then replied to him. "What else do you want me to do?"

"I don't want you to do anything. I just..." I then simply watched as Dustystorm took a deep breath. "...I guess I'm scared you *will*."

At those words, it almost felt as if the cave floor collapsed below me, and for a moment, I was questioning that I'd heard my mate correctly. "What?"

"Well, I don't know if it was clear before, but..." Dustystorm went on despite my strong reaction, though I could tell he looked reluctant. "I just worry that he might end up being *back* in your life."

"*What?*" I repeated, sharper this time, as my head began to spin. "Dustystorm, we've talked about this. It would take a whole heck of a lot for me to be even *civil* with him."

I then let out a huff, shrugging. "Sure, Breezepelt is the father of my kit. Whether I like it or not, I guess he'll always be associated with me... by default."

Dustystorm then gave a lash of his tail. "He *wasn't* up until a couple of quarter moons ago!"

"What point are you trying to make here?" I demanded, still hardly

able to process this conversation. "You *just* said that you trust me."

Dustystorm then tried to look at me reassuringly once again, but I barely saw it. "I *do*, Goldenshine, but... I don't know, it's easy to want to stay away when he does nothing but be cruel and dangerous," he tried to explain. Then his pale blue eyes washed over with worry once again. "But now that he's acting like he's changed... it might be easier for you to let him back in. I mean, you said it – that bond doesn't just vanish."

Thank StarClan the tunnels were already loud and echoing with the chatter of our Clanmates – otherwise, the entire Clan would be in on this conversation with my voice raising like it was. "*You* said it, Dustystorm — it did vanish. I made it vanish! As you know, that 'bond' tried to kill me. Tried to kill *you*. Fought on the side of the Dark Forest." My voice cracked with intensity. "If you think I've forgotten that, then you don't know me at all."

"Goldenshine, I do!" Dustystorm demanded back at me. He then let out another sigh. "But... I just don't want you to get hurt."

"I'm sorry, when did I become a three moon-old kit?" I snapped. "In case you've forgotten, I am a fully grown she-cat that can make my own decisions, and won't make those decisions rashly." *Getting hurt...* I then repeated to myself contemptuously. *I can't help but wonder if this is about more than that... why else would he be accusing me like this?*

"Goldenshine, I'm just trying to–"

I was getting so upset, I didn't even let Dustystorm finish. "And you questioning me—making it sound like I might invite him back into my life without thinking..." I shook my head. "That hurts more than you realize."

A long silence fell like a stone between us. Then, a long silence followed. Dustystorm looked down, ears twitching. My tail flicked with agitation as my ears continued to grow hot.

I then heard Dustystorm let out sigh beside me. "Maybe I shouldn't have said anything."

I flicked my gaze at him only for a moment before looking back down at my paws. "Maybe you shouldn't have."

I could see Dustystorm's ears flick in alarm beside me. I then turned back to the half-finished wall in front of us. "Anyway, we need to finish this den. Soon it'll be even darker in here and it'll be impossible to do anything."

I could feel my mate looking at me for a long moment, and then he eventually sighed again. "Alright. Goldenshine?"

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry," Dustystorm meowed quietly as he picked up some brambles, his eyes now searching. "I really didn't want you to feel that way."

I still didn't look directly at him, flicking my tail dismissively. "It's fine," I then muttered. "Just hand me some brambles."

Dustystorm stared at me for a few more long moments before warily doing as I asked.

And then, he almost seemed to disappear beside me as I began to weave brambles and dive deep into my thoughts.

I was *angry,* if that wasn't clear already. My mind was *reeling*.

Having to fend off Breezepelt each time he did something stupid towards me or Swiftflight had been frustrating enough, but now this was causing trouble between me and Dustystorm. And the thing that cut deepest was that I hadn't done anything *wrong*. In fact, I was only doing what I thought was right - I had turned Breezepelt away. I had drawn clear lines. I had been honest. And yet, here we were.

And what would happen now... if I ever *did* decide to do something? I mean, I *wouldn't*. But even asking the question... even having to reassure Dustystorm of something that should have been *obvious* left a bad taste in my mouth. How idiotic did he think I was? Assuming that I would drop everything and be all friendly with Breezepelt just because he wasn't acting completely evil

anymore.

I had worked so hard to move on from Breezepelt in *all* ways. I felt like I'd been trying to prove myself from the moment that Breezepelt and I first went our separate ways, even. I'd tried to claw my way back from it and prove not only was I fully loyal to my Clan, but that being even acquainted with a cat like Breezepelt was a dumb idea among dumb ideas.

Sure, Dustystorm very well could just be worried about my safety like he said he was, but... it didn't feel like just that. Not anymore, at least. It felt like doubt or *suspicion* even. Like maybe some part of him didn't fully believe that I fully was moved on - that I wanted to keep Breezepelt at a distance. And like I'd told him, that *stung*.

Maybe we'd talk it out later, but right now, I couldn't even *look* at my mate.

I didn't even know how long we stood like that — silent, close in body but distant in everything else. Dustystorm hadn't said another word. Maybe he could sense how far away I'd drifted, or maybe he was afraid to talk to me.

Either way, I still didn't look at him.

I just kept building the wall, slowly trying to tame the flame that had ignited as quickly as a lightning strike.

Chapter 15

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I was almost certain that my neck was going to be stuck looking straight ahead for the rest of my life, considering how intently I was staring forward, determined to look nowhere else.

But especially over to my left.

And typically silences that occurred when one Clan was escorting another Clan to their border were very expected, however, for me, it was as loud as it would be if everyone here were yowling at the top of their lungs.

That was because I knew that there was at least one cat in the group that wanted to speak, but *I* didn't want him to.

And I couldn't help but flick my eyes over in Breezepelt's direction, and instead of my gaze landing on a certain black pelt, I was almost amused to instead catch Snowstorm's expression from where she stood on the other side of the WindClan patrol. Her blue eyes were narrowed, and she seemed to be intently looking at my father... probably because I refused to. *And this is why you're my best friend.*

I then looked over my shoulder towards Cherryfall, who was still at the rear, and I had to suppress a purr as I immediately met her amber gaze, which was clearly glowing with concern as she seemed to send me a silent apology. *And Great StarClan, and this is why you're my mate.*

I then brought my gaze back forward, making sure that on the way there, my eyes didn't land on anything in between.

And as we all continued to walk, I practically wanted to shake out my fur from how much I could feel Breezepelt's gaze burning into my pelt. Sure, from my peripheral, I could tell that the black tom

wasn't staring at me constantly, but instead was shooting gazes towards me whenever it seemed to come to his mind.

I flicked my gaze over to my left as quickly as possible, just barely being able to catch the light brown pelt that was walking beside my father. *Heathertail is next to you,* I told Breezepelt in my own head. Goldenshine had told me a while ago that she'd sensed something between the two of them, *so why aren't you paying attention to her?*

I then felt my blood seem to warm and bubble up with frustration. *I made my point when I spoke to him in WindClan,* I then thought. *What does he think that looking at me is going to do?*

I then had to suppress a snort. *"Oh, Breezepelt, I've seen you looking my way a lot. I am extremely touched. I have changed my mind and have decided that I want you to look at me like that for the rest of my life!" Foxdung. What an idiot.*

I then began to shake my head slowly, having no idea if anyone around me was able to sense the irritation that had overcome me. I couldn't even believe that I had been selected for this patrol. Great StarClan, it was so out there that I was almost convinced that Bramblestar had caught on to this whole this and was trying to test me.

Well, even if that was the case, I wasn't going to give in... and I knew I had Goldenshine's prayers to StarClan coming my way.

I even sent my own as we continued to trudge through the muddy forest, passing through what *used* to be the training hollow.

I rolled my eyes as I realized this. This escort had already felt eternal, and even if I wasn't escorting my estranged father on this patrol, I still wasn't particularly enjoying trudging through the mucky ground and the countless deep puddles.

But thank StarClan, the stream – or what used to be just a stream – was now in sight, and we *finally* would be able to drop off this WindClan patrol and go on our way.

As we all began to slow down to a stop, my mate was the first to

speak, padding forward so that she could face the WindClan cats. "This is where your new border is, right?" I then had to hold back a purr once again – Cherryfall probably sounded perfectly sweet to them, but I personally could hear the bitter edge in her voice. "I hope that you all get back safely!"

Nightcloud dipped her head to the she-cat. "And thank you all for the escort," the older she-cat meowed cordially. Her voice then lowered as she flicked her gaze to the side for a moment. "We could have made our way back just fine..."

I narrowed my eyes at the WindClan she-cat, but I knew she couldn't see. I then muttered almost inaudibly, "Then don't poke your rabbit-sniffing noses in our territory when you don't have to..."

I then thought that I could hear a sniff come from nearby, and I flicked my ears in surprise when I looked up to see what looked like a glint of amusement in Breezepelt's eyes from where he stood next to Nightcloud.

He had heard me. *Creep.* I broke my gaze away from him just as quickly as I had looked at him.

"...but I guess there's safety in numbers during this time," Nightcloud finished. She then nodded to her patrol, flicking her tail forward. "Alright, let's get back before Onestar starts to worry that we drowned."

Oh, yes, I said to just *myself* this time, *I'm sure he's ripping his fur our with anxiety...*

And as the WindClan patrol began to pad away, their fur appearing to bristle at the thought of having to trudge through the stream, I continued to feel Breezepelt's gaze coming my way. I could almost *feel* his pleading.

But I didn't look back at him. It wouldn't do anything for me. *It won't do anything for you.* I then told myself simply, having to push down guilt as I shut out the WindClan tom. *I'm being naïve. It is naïve of me to think that he's changed, and naïve of me to think that my words got to him. I don't care how he looks at me. He's not fooling me. I was*

right the first time.

I then fully turned my back on the WindClan patrol, coming face to face with Snowstorm and Cherryfall as the splashes and steps of the group of cats began to fade away. Both she-cats looked concerned, their eyes slightly wide and their gazes searching.

I let out a sigh, raising my tail to ask for silence before either of them could speak. "Yes, I am fine."

I then slowly began to pad up to meet them. "No, I am not upset. Yes, I am annoyed..." I then let out a huff as I stopped beside them. "...but no, it won't get me down."

It was silent for a moment, and Snowstorm then narrowed her eyes and exchanged a glance with Cherryfall. "...Are you sure?"

I let out an exasperated sigh. "Yes! I am sure," I then leaned into Cherryfall for a moment as she ran her tail along my flank, and the three of us began to trudge through the muddy forest. "It's just like a burr in my fur or a thorn in my paw," I then tried to explain to them. "I have to ignore it... until I can pull it out."

Cherryfall's amber eyes flashed with alarm. "Pull it out?" Cherryfall echoed, her voice rising with worry. "What does that mean you're going to do to Breezepelt?"

I stared wide-eyed back at my mate. "Nothing! That was a bad analogy!" I reassured her. "I just have to ignore him, that's all."

Snowstorm raised an eyebrow from where she walked on my other side. "You really think that's going to get him off your back?"

"Well, I'm not going to *talk* to him again, if I can help it," I said, my tail lashing once. "And anyways, I already told him to stay away from me and Goldenshine, and he didn't listen to that. So, all I can do is not acknowledge his presence."

Cherryfall looked at me carefully. "And... you're okay with that?"

I sniffed, giving the she-cat a shrug. "I should be thrilled about it! Why would I want to be associated with him at all?"

Cherryfall gave me a shrug right back. "While he's from a different Clan, he is your father, I suppose," she murmured.

I snorted. "He's never acted like one," I reminded my mate. "We had one civil conversation at a Gathering when I was an apprentice, and it's only gone downhill from there."

"True," Snowstorm then cut in. "It would exhaust me just giving the list of all the treachery he's caused..." A chill then seemed to run down the white she-cat's spine. "All of the cats he's hurt and betrayed since then..."

"Exactly," I then muttered tautly. "He is completely idiotic if he thinks I would ever give him a chance." I let out a sigh, my frustration still bubbling to the surface as I thought about his persistence. "He's trying to redeem himself and worm his way in, and it's not going to happen... not on my watch."

My ears then flicked as I heard Cherryfall let out a quiet huff. I turned to her, took a deep breath to calm myself down, and began to rub her back with my tail. "You okay?"

She then shook her head quickly, as if to pull herself away from her thoughts. "Yes, I'm fine!" she reassured me. "Just..." She trailed off, sighing and furrowing her eyebrows. "...thinking."

I purred softly with amusement. "Can I hear one of your thoughts?"

"You've got some good thoughts, Cherryfall!" Snowstorm chimed in with a teasing purr.

Cherryfall purred with amusement as well, though she shook her head and flicked her tail dismissively, to my disappointment. "I appreciate it, but... don't worry about it," she kindly insisted to the both of us. "It was nothing."

I couldn't help but narrow my eyes back at her. I don't know why she had even tried – I knew it wasn't *nothing*. "Alright..." I still muttered, leaning in towards my mate until my muzzle brushed her ear and practically pressing up against her as we squeezed through the tunnel that led into our underground camp. "You're not fooling

me. I may try to pry you about it later." *I'll let you off for today.*

"You're not a good whisperer," I heard Snowstorm meow behind us.

Cherryfall rolled her eyes back at me. "That's fine," she then purred, flicking my ear with her tail affectionately.

The three of us then made our way deeper into camp, and while we had returned just as the sun was setting, our makeshift camp was still lively with activity – it seemed that a hunting patrol had just returned with probably the only somewhat salvageable prey they could find, dens were still being built, and cats were still pacing about as they tried to adjust to the space. *We're making do, that's for sure...*

I then blinked in surprise as I felt Cherryfall brush against me with her tail once again. "Are you hungry?" she asked me, her amber eyes now warm. "I'll get us something from the fresh-kill pile. Shrew?"

I looked at her affectionately, my heart suddenly feeling soft with how thoughtful she was. "Oh, you know it. Thank you."

"Always," she replied gently as we exchanged a loving look. She then turned toward Snowstorm with a polite nod. "Snowstorm, do you want anything?"

My best friend immediately shook her head. "I'm all good! Thanks, Cherryfall."

"Sure!" Cherryfall then purred cheerfully, touching her muzzle to Snowstorm's cheek before turning to me and giving my nose a gentle lick. "See you all in a moment!"

She then quickly whipped herself around, now on a mission as she trotted over to where the fresh-kill pile was at the other side of camp. I watched her go, my chest warm as I followed her with my eyes.

And as Snowstorm and I continued to walk deeper into camp, I heard her let out a sigh beside me. "She is a blessing of a she-cat, Swiftflight," she then meowed to me, her head shaking slowly in

amazement.

"I know," I murmured as I exchanged a baffled glance with my best friend. "I don't deserve her."

"Oh, come on," Snowstorm scoffed, giving me a playful nudge. "You've worked so hard, you've made it to a point where it could be interpreted that you have the smallest chance of deserving her."

I gave the she-cat a fully deadpan expression for just a moment before simply shrugging. "I'll take it."

As we continued to walk, I then noticed Snowstorm seem to narrow her eyes toward the warriors' den. "Hm... have you made a nest for yourself yet?"

I snorted. "No. It's hard to find moss that isn't *soaked*. I haven't been able to sleep very much because of it..." *Hardly any at all...*

"Right? But I think the apprentices have been gathering a *bunch*," Snowstorm then explained excitedly as she lashed her tail forward. "They've started a pile near the elders' den, and I want to check it *out*."

"And check it out we shall," I meowed with a dip of my head.

We picked up the pace, padding up to the moss pile in just a couple of heartbeats.

However, as we arrived, my paws slowed slightly. I immediately caught sight of Lightningstrike already there, his yellow eyes narrowed and pensive as he scanned through the moss pile.

I actually had to suppress a sharp sniff, but bit back the reflex and instead just glanced back at Snowstorm for a moment. *This should be interesting.*

The sound of our pawsteps must've reached him, because the black tom looked up sharply. His ears flicked and his eyes flashed with surprise as he saw us approaching. "Oh! Hey, you guys!"

"Hi, Lightningstrike!" Snowstorm greeted her Clanmate, nodding

warmly. She then let out a purr as she gestured to the moss pile. "Looks like we had the same idea."

The tom then blinked, clearly caught off guard. "The... the same?" he then stammered, bringing me to try and suppress a smirk. "Oh! Yeah, we had the same idea! T-to get some moss!" He then quickly stepped aside, making room for us to view the pile. "Here, there's plenty. The apprentices are *amazing* for being able to find this much."

I sniffed, my head shaking slowly. "No kidding," I muttered, stepping forward and starting to sift through the moss. *I'll take whatever is here... but I want to try and get some softer moss for Cherryfall's side...* I decided as I then began to snatch at clumps with my paws.

And out of the corner of my eye, I could not help but try to observe Lightningstrike beside me. Though he was busy gathering moss...

He was very, *very* clearly sneaking glances at my best friend.

Great StarClan, this was an example of sneaking glances at someone in the *right* way.

I studied him for a moment longer, wondering if he even realized what he was doing or if he had any intention of snapping out of it.

So, I figured I'd test him. "So, Lightningstrike," I then meowed, trying to keep my tone casual, "how have you been handling all of this?"

The black tom paused for a moment, processing the question before giving a shake of his head. "Oh! As well as I can!" he began. "I mean, I hate being away from our camp, and I worry that it'll just be stuck underwater forever, but..." His gaze swept around the temporary camp, and his voice softened slightly. "I'm just glad everyone is safe. And I suppose..."

My eyebrows then raised as his eyes flicked towards Snowstorm once again, "everyone I care about is here. So, how can I complain?"

Wow, I then thought as I snuck my own glance over at Snowstorm.

Are you seeing this? Hearing this?

Before I could even respond to Lightningstrike, I saw his ears twitch again as he looked over at Snowstorm, who was focused on her own bundle of moss. "Oh! Is all of the log moss gone already?" he asked suddenly. "That's definitely the softer type. Here..."

Without hesitation, he then held out the moss he'd collected. "You can take what I found," he offered to the white she-cat. "It doesn't take a lot for me to fall asleep, so I'll take some of the rougher moss."

Even in the dim light of the tunnel, I could see the glow in his yellow eyes. *Wow, wow.*

To my surprise, Snowstorm's eyes seemed to glow too as she looked at him in disbelief. "Lightningstrike, are you sure?"

When the black tom simply gave her an eager nod, she purred with amazement and took his moss in her jaws. "Well, thank you! That's so sweet of you."

"Sweet. As. Honey," I then muttered, a smirk slowly emerging on my face.

Snowstorm snapped her gaze back at me for a moment, her eyes narrowed as Lightningstrike spoke again. "It's no problem, really," he meowed, giving a shrug as his ears flattened shyly.

Then, with that, he picked up his remaining moss and began to head off. "I'll see you all soon. Goodnight!"

And even once the tom had completely gone, Snowstorm and I sat there in silence for a moment as we finished collecting our moss.

But as we began to put our piles together to carry, I found that I couldn't stay silent any more – rare for me. "So, are we going to talk about that?"

I flicked my ears when she let out a deep huff. "Talk about what?"

She clearly knew what. "I cannot *believe* it's my turn to tease you," I

then meowed, my head shaking slowly.

"Great StarClan, Swiftflight."

"It is finally time for payback!"

My best friend then groaned. "Swiftflight, I think we've established that you're pretty grateful I teased you all those moons ago."

I then narrowed my eyes back at her. "Exactly, Snowstorm. *Exactly*."

"Stop it, you're being weird!" Snowstorm then exclaimed, pushing me lightly with her paw.

I stared wide-eyed back at her. "*I'm* being weird?"

"You're being too giddy," the white she-cat complained, her eyebrows furrowing. "It's off-putting."

I then snorted and shrugged. "Excuse me for being giddy because someone is clearly eyeing my best friend!"

Snowstorm sighed again and closed her eyes. "Swiftflight, oh my gosh."

"I'm sorry," I said with mock seriousness, "are you not seeing what I'm seeing?" I hesitated for half a heartbeat before adding, "Or what I *have* been seeing?"

"Oh no, I have!" she admitted, exasperated. "I just..." She sighed again, this time heavier. "I'm trying to figure out how I feel about it."

Hm.

It was those words that made me decide to ease up on the teasing – I genuinely hadn't expected it to be something that would distress Snowstorm so much, and I was now very eager to find out why. "Oh yeah? So you have noticed it then?"

Snowstorm sniffed, letting out a purr. "Who wouldn't?" she meowed, sniffing once before shooting me a look. "Sorry, I should give you

some credit for actually being able to notice a cat's feelings."

"It's fine," I said dismissively with a light flick of my tail. "What are you trying to figure out?"

"I mean... I just don't know if that's something I'm ready to explore," she admitted to me, her voice lowering. "Having those kinds of feelings... having a mate..." She let out a little huff, like the very thought exhausted her. "After so many moons of carrying Snowflight's spirit, I feel like I'm still getting used to being myself, you know?" She then paused, her brows furrowing once again. "Anyways... would it be weird? Snowflight and Lightningstrike were kin."

I narrowed my eyes for a moment in thought – it was a valid question. "But we've already established that *you* and Lightningstrike are *not* kin," I then reminded her. "Literally the furthest from it. And anyway, you're fully yourself, Snowstorm, and that's according to Snowflight herself."

I then put the tip of my tail on my friend's shoulder. "She's not a part of you," I went on. "Sure, you once carried and still carry her wisdom, but... you're your own cat now. She shouldn't have to hold you back from anything."

Snowstorm was quiet for another long moment, staring off at a tunnel wall. "I suppose not," she then murmured. "But still... I just don't think I'm ready."

She then looked at me, her blue eyes flashing with alarm. "Don't get me wrong—Lightningstrike is charming and funny and so, so kind... probably the kindest cat I've ever come across."

This made me let out a quiet contemplative grunt, but I didn't speak as Snowstorm continued. "But... I'm just not sure I'm ready to bring... *that* kind of cat into my life yet."

I narrowed my eyes at her for a moment. "I completely understand." We then shared a warm look before I gave a flick of my tail, gesturing for us to leave the moss pile. "But I need you to know that I was *fully* prepared to pay you back for the moons of

teasing you gave me."

Snowstorm purred and shook her head slowly. "Oh, fair enough." She then gave a flick of her ears. "I do have one question though."

I blinked, intrigued. "Hm?"

"You also collected some soft moss from that pile..." Snowstorm murmured, cocking one of her eyebrows. "Why didn't *you* offer to give me any?"

"Because I don't have a crush on you, mouse-brain!"

We then shared a *mrrow* of laughter as we began to make our way towards the warriors den – actually having to think before taking each pawstep forward now with how dark the tunnels had become with the arriving moonhigh.

But I was just barely able to see the ginger tabby pelt of Cherryfall, also approaching the warriors den from the other side of camp. She noticed me just a moment later, and I couldn't help but purr when she excitedly lifted up her jaw, presenting the shrew she'd found at the fresh-kill pile. I then stared warmly at her as I held up our moss with one of my paws.

Cherryfall seemed to purr as she then continued to walk, and Snowstorm and I exchanged an amused glance before doing the same. My best friend then let out a sniff. "For now, I'll just enjoy the cuteness of you and Cherryfall."

That made me purr once again, and I gave my friend a light nudge. "Which, *again*, partly all began because of *your* teasing."

"Oh, be quiet."

I then stepped aside as we made it to the warriors den, letting Snowstorm pad in in front of me before following her in. And as we began to part ways inside, I gave the white she-cat a nod. "Goodnight, furball," I then whispered, winking. "Enjoy your extra soft moss."

Snowstorm gave a roll of her eyes. "Great StarClan, I'm going to

have Jayfeather take a look at you."

I quietly purred with amusement, giving her a lash of my tail in farewell before padding over to meet Cherryfall, who had reserved a spot for our nest with some buttercups earlier today. I gave her a lick on the head in greeting and quickly began to spread out the moss for our nest.

Then, as the two of us settled in, I could not help but tell Cherryfall what I had observed about Lightningstrike and Snowstorm. Thank StarClan, neither of them were in earshot, and I was a better whisperer than Snowstorm claimed I was.

And of course, as I had expected, Cherryfall was just as "giddy" as I was. "I thought I had noticed him stealing glances at her sometimes!" Cherryfall mewed, her eyes glowing with excitement. "Swiftflight, they would be adorable together, don't you think?"

"Oh, trust me," I said with a flick of my tail, "I tried to tell her."

Cherryfall purred, giving me a quick look up and down. "Look at you, trying to matchmake now."

"I guess I owe her," I murmured, leaning in to affectionately nuzzle my mate's cheek. I glanced down at the last bite of the shrew between us, then looked up at Cherryfall to see if she wanted it. She gave a small nod of encouragement, so I quickly grabbed it in my own jaws. "She says she's not ready, and that's okay, but I—"

I then cut myself off as my eyes narrowed toward the entrance of the den, seeing a familiar golden-brown tabby pelt stepping through the shadows. "Hm," I muttered, an edge of humor in my voice. "Here comes trouble."

Cherryfall purred. "Oh, of the worst kind." She then nodded to her formal mentor as she walked in, her eyes bright. "Hi, Goldenshine!"

Goldenshine seemed distracted at first, for whatever reason, but she shook herself out of it and gave Cherryfall a nod. "Hey, Cherryfall." Her gaze then shifted to me. "And hey, you," she meowed, giving my head a light push with her tail, her tone warmer. "Glad to see

you made it out of that escort alive. Are you okay?"

I gave a shrug and let out a slow sigh, guilt pricking at my chest despite my best efforts to push it all away. "I'm fine," I replied evenly. "I... I just ignored his sorry tail."

My mother let out a huff of relief. "Good," she breathed. "He didn't bother you at all?"

"Not at all," I then muttered as I gave a weak shrug. "I barely gave him the chance."

Then, to my surprise, Goldenshine didn't answer immediately, and instead looked at me for a long moment. "Must be nice..." she then murmured, shifting her gaze to simply stare off.

I exchanged a concerned glance with Cherryfall. "What?" I asked, my voice now cautious. "Did he bother you when the patrol was here?"

Goldenshine gave a weak shrug. "He just tried to get me to talk with him. I ignored him too."

With that reveal, anger began to flare up in my chest. "He tried to talk to you?" I pressed, my voice rising. "Has he done that before?"

Goldenshine shook her head, clearly as angry as me, but flicked her tail dismissively. "But like you, I ignored his sorry tail."

"Good," I replied tautly, my mind already spinning with worry. "But Goldenshine, I really don't like that."

"I don't either. We *all* don't," Goldenshine muttered, causing my eyes to narrow. "But I got away."

"Sure..." I muttered. "Good," I then repeated, even though it wasn't to me in the slightest. *He'd better not do that again. Thank StarClan Goldenshine got away.*

"Supposed to be..." my mother then muttered, almost too quietly to hear - I wasn't sure if she meant for us to catch it.

She then shook her head again before straightening up and nodding to me and Cherryfall. "I'll see you all in the morning. Goodnight."

Cherryfall eyes locked on my mother as she began to pad away. "Goodnight?" she echoed.

"Goodnight..." I then murmured almost mindlessly after a few heartbeats.

I watched her go with Cherryfall, heading toward the nest she shared with Dustystorm. But when she curled down, her back was turned to him.

At this sight, my chest tightened. That was extremely weird. *What happened? Did the two of them get into a fight?*

I then sighed, trying to push down my worry as I let my head lie on my paws. "That was... convoluted," I muttered.

"I know..." Cherryfall murmured beside me. "I hope she's okay." Her jaws stretched open in a wide yawn. "If I wasn't so tired, I would probably be analyzing it all night." She let out a small sigh and then leaned into my side, warm and soft against me. "I don't know about you, but I'm ready to go to sleep!"

I hesitated, my paws still for a moment as something heavy twisted in my stomach. "Actually..." I said slowly, "I'm not too tired. I was maybe going to go for a walk. There's..." I sighed and gave a small shrug, "a lot on my mind."

Cherryfall let out a sniff. "My goodness, surely there is," she said with gentle understanding. She shifted beside me, her amber eyes looking up at me with a mock-innocent glint. "Go on ahead. I'll just miss my cuddle buddy."

I couldn't stop the purr that rose in my throat. Standing, I bent down and nuzzled the side of her neck. "Don't worry, I'll be back in just a little while—and I'll be sure to give you all of the cuddles then."

She leaned into my touch, her own purr vibrating against my muzzle. "I love you."

"I love you too," I whispered, and we touched noses for a long, soft heartbeat.

"Please be safe out there," she said as I pulled away.

"Of course," I murmured, turning toward the camp exit, her warmth still lingering on my fur as I quietly padded through the warriors den and towards the entrance.

As I went, I couldn't help but look back at Goldenshine and Dustystorm one last time, and just seeing the way they lied in their nest, I thought that *anyone* could sense the tension there. *What in the name of StarClan happened?* I asked myself again. *Did...*

I then took in a sharp inhale as something hit me. *I swear, if it has something to do with Breezepelt...* I then thought as I began to fume. *I'm going to chuck him into the floodwater. I already want to for trying to talk to Goldenshine.*

I then closed my eyes and forced myself to take a deep breath. *For now, I'm just going to take my walk and return in a little while.*

With another deep breath, I then made my way out of the warriors den and out into the darkness of the tunnel clearing.

And honestly, while I was going to return in a little while, I wasn't sure if I planned on going to sleep once I did. Sure, like I'd told Snowstorm, I'd hardly slept in the last few days.

But no sleep had meant no nightmares, and I was completely okay with that.

Chapter 16

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I have to admit, this flood was already a pretty tough situation. Sure, we all had made it out of the worst of it alive – just a little wet and irritated. It was something that I thought we'd be able to just laugh off once it went away.

But that wasn't the case anymore. A shadow (among the shadows of the tunnels) hung over the camp now as we grieved the loss of Seedpaw, who had drowned when she helped Lilypaw untangle herself from tendrils underwater when they were out in the forest.

Of course, it hurt more than *anything* for Seedpaw to die so young. She was as bright and determined as any apprentice, and she would never live to become a warrior.

I think it was one of the worst things that a cat could witness.

That was hard enough on its own. But my goodness, could I hardly stand to look at my apprentice during the vigil.

The poor little thing looked completely crestfallen – I mean, who wouldn't after they'd lost their sister and best friend. But what broke my heart was to see the guilt I saw in her eyes. *This is absolutely not her fault*, I thought to myself, my chest feeling heavy as I realized that my apprentice felt this way. And I need to, I will remind her of that every day.

Of course, I had already told the she-cat that we would not be doing any sort of training for the next few days – she needed to grieve and take care of herself, and this vigil wasn't going to be nearly enough time to let her process this.

And as the vigil went on, I kept sending prayers to StarClan and sending all of the love and support I had to Lilypaw silently,

watching her from afar from where I lied with Thornclaw, Squirrelflight, and Bramblestar.

I then glanced over at Daisy, who was sitting next to Minty – a kittypet that Bramblestar, me, and one of our border patrols had found just a few days prior. The poor she-cat had already been shaken up by the floods, and was even more terrified since we first allowed her to take shelter with us. But goodness gracious, having to witness a tragedy like this so soon probably made her feel just as dejected as she already had been.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed when I suddenly noticed Brackenfur, Daisy, and then Purdy rise to their paws. I had to screw my eyes shut for a moment as I was suddenly overwhelmed with grief – I knew what was happening. *It's time to bury her...*

I could hardly stand to watch as the three cats made their way to the sweet apprentice. I couldn't look at Brackenfur without feeling like my chest was the weight of a boulder. My kin had already gone through so much losing his mate, Sorreltail, in the Dark Forest battle, and he'd hardly had the time to deal with that before losing one of his daughters.

Of course, Thornclaw and I knew that all too well. And I knew that Brackenfur would feel an emptiness with him for the rest of his life that there was no way to replace.

This thought brought me to close my eyes, lowering my head down towards my paws. *Snowflight, help Seedpaw have a swift, graceful journey up to StarClan...*

As I did this, I then felt Thornclaw grip me tighter from where he had his tail wrapped around my back. I let out a long sigh, digging my head into my mate's shoulder as Brackenfur, Daisy, and Purdy then carried Seedpaw out of the tunnels.

It then was silent for several more heartbeats as ThunderClan continued to grieve. The first movement I eventually saw was Leafpool padding up to Lilypaw. The medicine cat seemed to try and get some words out of my apprentice that I couldn't hear, before reluctantly walking away from her, her head low and amber

eyes full of dejection.

Bramblestar was watching her, his amber eyes fearful. "Is Lilypaw ill?"

"I'm not sure," Leafpool answered. "It may be the onset of whitecough, or it may just be grief. It's so hard when we can't get properly dry and warm."

At those words, I simply let out a long sigh.

And I felt Thornclaw pull me even closer to him as he then spoke. "At least yesterday's patrol over the border brought back a decent haul of fresh-kill," he commented before standing up. "I'll lead another patrol there today, if you'd like."

Squirrelflight also stood up with a nod. "Good idea. I'll go too."

Bramblestar then followed, also letting out a sigh. "We have to find some dry bedding."

I let out a huff at Bramblestar's words, because unfortunately, he was right. Yes, Seedpaw and Lilypaw had managed to find a good deal of moss for us, but none of it had been the dryest, and the humidity and dew in these tunnels was making them moist. *Goodness, none of us are going to feel fully dry for moons...*

I then flicked my ears as I saw movement beside me, and I turned my head to see Spiderleg padding up to our group. "Where are you going to look?" the black and brown tom asked, an edge of distaste in his meow. "Even if it's not underwater, it's soaked through. There's no sun to dry anything out, and it looks like it's going to rain again tonight."

Great. And Spiderleg being the one to deliver the news makes it even more wonderful.

I then narrowed my eyes, wracking my brain for a solution.

"Spiderleg's right," I then heard Daisy meow. "I've looked everywhere for some more moss, feathers, dry leaves, even inside hollow trees, and there's nothing else."

"Hm..." I murmured as I then slowly stood up. I had an idea, but I was reluctant to even say it out loud – especially with Spiderleg just a couple tail-lengths away. "I don't know how anyone would feel about this, but what about those pelts in the Twoleg nest, Bramblestar? The one that I came from?"

I was searching everyone's gaze as I spoke – no one was objecting, so I went on. "I remember there were plenty, and they're really dry and soft."

Spiderleg let out a disgusted sniff. "Of course that'd be your suggestion."

I shot my gaze back towards my Clanmate, my eyes narrowed. "Watch it," I muttered tautly as I heard Thornclaw hiss beside me.

Graystripe spoke next, and thank StarClan, his words weren't nasty. "I like it," the older tom meowed lightly. "I'll go if you want, Bramblestar."

"No, you've done it once," the ThunderClan leader immediately objected to the gray tom. "I'll lead it."

"I'm coming too!" I cut in without hesitation. "And..." I then narrowed my eyes, scanning my eyes around the tunnels as our Clanmates began to rise from their vigil spots. "We can take Poppyfrost, Lionblaze, and Cinderheart, if they're willing."

I then worriedly flicked my gaze back to Bramblestar. "-and if that's okay."

Bramblestar purred and gave me a nod, looking almost amused at my wariness, as Squirrelflight padded up to her mate with narrowed eyes. "You've done this patrol once, too, Bramblestar."

"And you too, Lilypetal," Thornclaw then meowed to me, giving me a light nudge with his own pale blue eyes narrowed.

"And I'm going to do it again," Bramblestar insisted to Squirrelflight.

I nodded towards the dark brown tabby, giving my mate a smug look. "You heard the leader."

"Being Clan leader isn't just about being the bravest, you mouse-brained idiot," Squirrelflight then retorted next to us.

Thornclaw then reflected the smug look I was giving him, nodding towards Squirrelflight. "You heard the she-cat," he then murmured before blinking in alarm. "Except I take out the mouse-brained idiot part."

"I'm going," I then heard Bramblestar demand. "I can't ask my Clanmates to do something that I wouldn't do myself."

We all then watched as he began to pad off, beckoning the cats I had chosen with him. "Come on, the sooner we go, the sooner we'll be back."

I then gave a sharp nod. "Sounds about right." I then touched my nose to Thornclaw's before beginning to follow my leader. "I'll see you later. I love you."

The golden brown tabby tom then let out a sigh. "I love you too, but hold on..." I then was surprised to feel Thornclaw's tail brushing along my flank to stop me, then gently pull me off to the side. I looked at him, confused, to find a pale blue gaze full of urging and concern. "Lilypetal, I really think that you should sit out this one."

Although I wanted to retort, I simply took a deep breath and waited for him to go on. "I felt you stirring next to me *all night* last night. I *know* you didn't sleep." My mate then let out a contemptuous sniff. "And as usual, I know *why*, whether you decide to tell me the details or not."

I flicked my tail dismissively at my mate's words. "Thornclaw, it's okay, and I *have* to go!" I insisted to him. "I know that nest more than anyone."

"Lilypetal, they can figure it out," Thornclaw replied, his tone sharp.

I shook my head back at him. "It'll go faster if I'm there! And anyway," I then nodded back towards Bramblestar, who was waiting for everyone to gather by the tunnel entrance. "You heard what he said – I can't make them do something that I wouldn't do."

I was surprised to see Thornclaw roll his eyes as he let out a frustrated huff. "You don't have to do what Bramblestar does – I don't care if you're the deputy," he then told me, the frustration in his voice becoming more clear with each word he said. "Sure, Bramblestar clearly has his hardships too, but... not yours."

With those words, I couldn't help but let out a long sigh and close my eyes for a moment, bringing Thornclaw to brush his tail against my cheek. "You need to take a breath and you need to rest," he then insisted, his voice softer now. "You've needed to for a while."

I blinked gratefully back at the tom, taking his tail from my face so that I could twin it with my own. "Thornclaw, I see what you're saying, and I will later, but... I *really* feel like I need to go on this one."

"And every one before that?" my mate then pressed, his voice rising again.

"What kind of cat would I be if I didn't?"

"Lilypetal, I swear to StarClan..." Thornclaw then breathed.

I took a step closer to my mate, genuinely hating to see him so frustrated. "Thornclaw, as always, I appreciate you caring, and I hear you." I then tightened my grip on his tail. "But I'll be fine!"

I then was surprised to see Thornclaw let out a very taut sigh, his eyes dark. "Yeah, *hearing*... exactly," he muttered, almost so quietly that I couldn't hear, before I felt him pull his tail away. "Whatever, Lilypetal. Go on."

I stared worriedly back at my mate, my stomach twisting at seeing his very obvious contempt. "Are you okay?"

Thornclaw let out a sniff. "Sure." When I blinked back at him in surprise, he let out a sigh, his eyes softening. "Yes," he then replied. "I'm not you, Lilypetal. I won't dictate your boundaries... as much as I want to."

He then gave me another light nudge as I rolled my eyes. "Just go on. I have to get going too," I then let out a sigh, touching his

muzzle to my head. "I love you, Lilypetal."

I purred, leaning my head into my mate's shoulder and neck fur. I felt my stomach twist with worry once again as I noticed that he felt just the smallest bit tense. "I love you too," I meowed as I pushed back my worry.

"You said you'd rest later," Thornclaw then meowed as he pulled away, his eyes luckily having the smallest gleam. "I'm holding you to that."

I then watched the golden brown tabby tom as he turned away and padded off. I was still having to push down my worry and guilt – I *hated* seeing him like this. And as always, I was overwhelmed to see how much he tried to look out for me, but I just wished that I could better explain how obligated that I felt to my Clan, especially during a time like this. I *could not* give up on them no matter what silliness from my past threatened to come out.

I mean, I was getting through, that was for sure. I'd kept so busy since the flood and getting ThunderClan back up on their paws that I'd hardly had time to think about anything else.

Which meant that Ashfur haunting me had exclusively been through dreams for the past few days – Thornclaw was right, I hadn't slept well, and as usual, my dreams had been full of that gray-speckled fur and those malicious blue eyes.

But despite that, I had been trying to put in the work and had been trying my best to support Bramblestar, and right now, that was good enough for me.

And when it came to Thornclaw, I would just have to keep trying to convince him that I was getting through, as much as I hated seeing the fear in his eyes each time I tried to. *His fear has merit – of course it does,* I had to admit to myself as I then begin to pad across our makeshift camp, *but I haven't completely crumbled yet. I will know if I need to take a break.*

I then pelted towards the tunnel entrance, realizing that the rest of the patrol was beginning to make their way out. Bramblestar had

trailed to the back, and was looking back at me with amber eyes full of amusement. "Is your mate pestering you about overcommitting too?"

I sniffed, giving a roll of my eyes. "Oh, you know it!" I purred as I gave the ThunderClan leader a nudge. "And I'm sure sometimes Squirrelflight silently curses her father for choosing you as his deputy sometimes."

Bramblestar then let out a grunt, his eyes narrowing. "Are you also implying that Thornclaw curses me for choosing you as deputy?"

"Of course not!" I insisted. I then narrowed my eyes, thinking for a moment before muttering, "But just in case... don't ask him about it."

The two of us shared a purr, and I flashed a warm look at my ThunderClan leader. *While Thornclaw seems certain that Bramblestar and I weren't dealing with adversity to the same degree, it was nice to have someone to relate to in all of this – having to lead a Clan while still recovering all of the chaos of the past... and our mates wanting us to rest up despite it,* I thought. *And despite everything, I'm still so honored that he chose me as his deputy, as much as I second-guess it constantly.*

As we got deeper into the muddy ThunderClan forest, I was pulled out of my thoughts when I heard Lionblaze speak. "Where is ShadowClan?" the younger warrior asked. "I feel like I haven't seen any sign of them since the flood was at its worst."

Bramblestar flicked his ears beside me. "They're probably in camp..." He then let out a snort. "Welcoming Rowanstar as their new leader."

I blinked in surprise. "Their new leader..." I then breathed. "I can't believe it."

"I don't think anyone can," Lionblaze then muttered.

I let out a sniff, narrowing my eyes as I dove into my thoughts again. *I wonder what Rowanstar will be like as leader?* I asked myself. *I certainly don't know him to be the most assertive... more passive.*

Definitely more passive. But Blackstar clearly thought he was worthy!

I then gave a worried flick of my ears. *I hope I won't be thought of that way when I become leader...*

I then yanked myself back into reality again as soon as my paws sank into a large puddle – we had made it to the worst patch of the flooding.

And with that, the entire patrol fell silent – the shock of the damage never lessened. The pools and puddles of water, the damaged vegetation, the floating debris... "Wow..." I breathed after several heartbeats. "This is brutal."

"No kidding," Bramblestar murmured.

"I can hardly tell where we are with all of this damage," Cinderheart then meowed, exchanging an apprehensive glance with Lionblaze.

I let out a sigh, narrowing my eyes as I scanned our surroundings. "I luckily think I can tell enough..." I then muttered, giving a lash of my tail. "This is where the trail begins that leads up to the Twoleg nest."

With that, Bramblestar gave a sharp nod, making my stomach twist once again. "Well, like you said, you'd know this area more than any of us, Lilypetal," the dark tabby tom meowed before stepping back and gesturing forward with his tail. "Lead the way."

Great geese gathering grubs on a grass pile, I thought anxiously.

And I hoped that that anxiety wasn't showing as I gave my leader a nod and began to lead the way.

We began to trudge up the hill, and I prayed to StarClan that no one would slip and begin to slide and crash down to the bottom. *They likely wouldn't be injured, but they'd be muddy... and incredibly angry with me.*

And as we went, I found that I was actually somewhat dreaded arriving at the Twoleg nest – aside from the obvious fact that I had moved on. While I would never live there again or even spend a

night there if I was paid with all of the prey on earth, that nest held memories, *not ideal ones, but they all lead me here.*

I had to admit that it would hurt me to see if the nest was damaged because of the flood. *The fence is probably all over the place, the nest itself probably took some damage, and my collar...*

I then flicked my ears. *My collar!*

At this thought, I found myself quickening my pace as we made our way up the hill. *I forgot that I left my collar right up against the fence after I was made deputy...* I recalled. *Shoot, the flood surely washed it away!*

When the Twoleg nest finally came into sight, it was absolutely *everything* that I had worried about; while the fence was mostly intact, several of the wooden planks had fallen, sunken, and were pointed every which way. The bottom half of the house looked like it had been dunked into the lake violently several times over, and debris was drifting everywhere. I wasn't sure if it was wishful thinking to hope that my collar was among that debris...

But I knew that worrying over my *kittypet collar* would not look good to my Clanmates, so I tried to stay calm as I led them closer to the destroyed fence. *At least this makes it easier to get into the backyard and inside...*

As we came to a stop, I took a deep breath and looked back at the patrol, gesturing to a gap in between two of the fence planks. "Alright, we're going to have to squeeze our way though here, trudge through the backya... *grass*, and then hope that the doo..."

I then gave a shake of my head. "-hope that we can find a way to get inside of the nest."

A couple of dreaded sighs followed my words, but everyone gave a nod. "We're right behind you," Bramblestar meowed to me.

I nodded back to the ThunderClan leader, padding up closer to the fence so that I could make my way through. But before I could do so, I couldn't help but gasp at the flash of pink I saw next to me

floating in the water.

I couldn't believe it, but there was my collar, *right there*.

By some miracle, it had managed to catch itself on a part of the fence that had peeled down and was jutting out. Even with the water that likely tried to rip it away, it had held on tight.

Thank *goodness.*

I left the collar there, proceeding to lead everyone through the yard. I was relieved to see that the back door was cracked open, being propped open by a chair to keep the water flowing through. *That hopefully means we won't have to trudge through water once we're inside...*

I was the first to jump up to the top of the chair – the cushion part – before leaping inside. But I cringed as soon as my paws felt the delightful texture of a soaked cushion. "Mmm... that is *not* a good sensation," I called down before leaping down to the other side. "Good luck!"

I then turned around, watching and trying not to be amused as each cat jumped up onto the chair and inside – Bramblestar, Poppyfrost, and then Cinderheart and Lionblaze.

Cinderheart's eyes were full of disgust as she gave a shake of her fur. "Never thought I would pray to StarClan to be given some RiverClan paws right now."

Bramblestar gave a sniff, exchanging an amused glance with me. "You and me both." He then let out a huff. "Alright, Lilypetal. Do you know where we'd find those pelts?"

I only had to think for a moment before nodding. "I do! The room where I remember sleeping every night." I glanced to my right. *The living room...* "I don't know what my housefolk were thinking, but there are pelts scattered all over the room."

And as I then led the patrol through the kitchen, it hit me that this was the first time I had actually been *inside* of this nest since I'd left it as a kittypet. While it clearly had taken a hit from the flood, it

was still fully recognizable, and I could practically visualize myself going about my day here. *The day that I left... who knew that one day I'd return to steal blankets?*

We made it to the end of the kitchen, and my heart sank as I came to an abrupt stop, nearly walking right into water. "Shoot!"

"What's the matter?" Bramblestar asked.

I let out a sigh, turning around to face the patrol. "So, here's the thing. There's this weird..." I trailed off for a moment as I tried to find my words. "...*in-between* area in this nest that's barely large enough to be considered a room, but my housefolk used it to clean the pelts like the ones we're taking and put them in these large white boxes."

I then glanced back at the room. "You have to go down some steps to get into the room, and then go *up* some stairs to get to the room on the other side. But... of course..."

I then stepped aside so that the patrol could see. "There are no stairs in sight right now."

I then looked at Bramblestar, whose amber eyes were deep in thought. "So, we'll have to leap across?"

"Unless you want to swim across!" I purred. "And when it comes to getting back on the other side with the pelts... we'll have to get there when we get there."

So, one by one, everyone leaped across, and I led the patrol into the living room. Thank StarClan, the blankets that my housefolk had left draped on couches and chairs and folded on tables were left unscathed.

Everyone immediately scattered, grabbing the first one that they could see. Poppyfrost leapt onto the couch, her blue eyes gleaming as she grabbed one. "There are perfect! Thank StarClan."

I then made my way into the room, grabbing a pelt that was folded on the lower level of a small table. I glanced back towards the doorway to see that Bramblestar had also grabbed his, and was

waiting at there while everyone finished up. He then looked back at the small flooded room behind him, narrowing his eyes at the water that was at least three tail-lengths deep. "Any ideas on how to get across, Lilypetal?"

I had to admit, the question filled me with panic for a moment as I flicked my eyes all over the living room trying to grasp at some semblance of an idea. But I was quickly filled with relief as I saw a wooden broom propped up against the wall next to the couch.

I quickly ran over to it. "I've got it!" I replied to the leader as used my two forepaws to knock the broom to the ground. I then nodded to Lionblaze. "Here, can you grab the other side of this for me?"

The ginger tom nodded, grabbing the pokey end of the broom while I grabbed the bottom end. Once we were close to the doorway I set my side down, and I helped Lionblaze lift his end of the broom and push it forward so that the end landed at the other side of the room.

It wasn't the most convenient, but it meant that we didn't have to try and leap across with these large clumps in our jaws. *I really hope this works... and if it doesn't, I'll never let myself live it down.*

I took a deep breath, turning to face the patrol. "Alright, who wants to go first?" I asked, the fear probably apparent in my voice. "I'll go last and make sure that the stick is steady while you all cross."

Bramblestar immediately gave a shrug, grabbing his pelt in his jaws again. "Here goes nothing."

Bramblestar made his way across slowly but surely, and everyone else followed behind him. At least I could rest easy knowing that everyone had made it across.

But now it was my turn. *Never been more thrilled in my life.*

The broom dipped under my weight as I stepped onto it, my claws scraping uselessly against the smooth wood. I kept the pelt clenched tightly in my jaws, trying not to think about the water below.

Bramblestar, Cinderheart, Lionblaze, and Poppyfrost were simply waiting on the far side. I could feel their eyes on me, but I set my

shoulders and kept moving. *Slow and steady, Lilypetal. You're doing well...*

But when I got halfway across, my paws suddenly locked.

The broom shifted, just enough that my stomach twisted into a tight knot. And in a blink, I wasn't in a Twoleg nest anymore.

I was back on the birch tree, high above the violent stream below at the border between ThunderClan and WindClan. Ashfur's pale eyes burned at me, furious and cold.

For once, I'd had him where I wanted. I'd tricked him and trapped him just like I'd planned. For a heartbeat, I'd felt invincible, and for once, *stronger* than him

But that hadn't meant I wasn't terrified out of my mind.

My claws had scraped against the slick bark then too, and the rush of triumph tangled with dread. I'd known what came next. He wouldn't change. He wouldn't stop.

And it had been up to me to end it.

The broom tilted again, and my chest squeezed tight. *Great StarClan, why now?*

This wasn't the Dark Forest, this wasn't Ashfur—it was just some gosh-darn *broom*, just some water, but I couldn't move. My legs trembled, and I had to tense them to keep from slipping off.

And finally, someone's voice broke through my head. "Lilypetal?" I heard Cinderheart call out, her voice soft and worried.

I clamped my jaws tighter around the blanket. "It's okay, I'm fine," I mumbled through the pelt, the words barely making it out.

"Lilypetal, you don't look fine," Poppyfrost called, ears pricked.

Heat and frustration pricked my ears. "I've got it," I said, sharper this time. "Just - just give me a moment."

The broom shook again, and my tail lashed for balance. I don't think I had ever felt so helpless as the patrol's stares burned into me. I forced a paw forward, but it shook so badly I had to yank it back.

"Lilypetal," Bramblestar then said gently. "Really, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I promise," I snapped. I wasn't, but I would say anything to dismiss their worry.

But unfortunately, there was a pause, the kind of awkward silence that tells you no one believes you.

I then could see Lionblaze padding up to the other side of the broom. "I can come get your pelt from you," Lionblaze offered, already shifting like he might climb out onto the broom.

"No!" The word ripped out of me, harsher than I meant. "It's too dangerous. You'll fall with me on here."

Bramblestar's tail flicked once. His tone stayed calm and steady as he then meowed without hesitation. "Then drop it."

I blinked at him. "What?"

"Drop the pelt," he said simply. "We have plenty. It's okay."

The words sat like stones in my chest. The whole reason we'd come here was these blankets. *If I let mine go...* "Bramblestar, I can't-"

"It's alright, Lilypetal," the leader insisted, his voice clear but still calm. "I just want you to get across."

But my paws were trembling so badly I couldn't take another step. And with tight jaws, I opened my mouth. The blanket slid free, thumped once against the broom, then toppled sideways.

It splashed into the water below and sank out of sight.

It was rare that I had ever felt this defeated.

"Now," Bramblestar said quietly. "Come across."

Without the weight in my jaws, the broom didn't feel quite so treacherous. My legs still shook, but I forced myself to move. One paw, then the other, until I finally leapt onto the kitchen floor beside them.

The breath I hadn't realized I was holding hissed out between my teeth. My ears burned hotter than a forest fire. I couldn't even meet anyone's gaze.

I'd slowed them all down, panicked over a broom and practically a *puddle*, and I'd lost the very thing we'd come for.

I could hardly find the words. "I'm sorry," I muttered quickly, pawing at the ground. "I can't believe that I did that. I ruined everything and I lost my pelt and I froze up like some useless apprentice-"

"Lilypetal," Bramblestar interrupted, his voice calm but firm. "You didn't ruin anything."

"Yes, I did!" The words burst out before I could stop them. "I slowed us down, I made a fool of myself, and I wasted the pelt." My claws scraped the stone as I pressed them down. "I don't even know *why* it happened."

Cinderheart stepped closer, her eyes warm. "Because you're not made of stone, Lilypetal. None of us are. It could've happened to any of us."

Lionblaze flicked his ear, his tone matter-of-fact. "One blanket won't make or break us."

Poppyfrost nodded quickly. "And you didn't make a fool of yourself. You got across safely. That's what matters most."

Oh, screw that! I would have rather fallen into the water if it meant that I didn't freeze up like that.

I shook my head, throat tight. Before I could even retort, I felt Bramblestar put the tip of his tail on my shoulder, and he met my eyes evenly. "Every warrior has their moments, Lilypetal. I wasn't particularly happy crossing like that."

His certainty made my pelt prickle with both gratitude and embarrassment. I wanted to believe him, to believe them *all,* but the image of that blanket sinking into the dark water clung to me.

I huffed, frustrated with myself and with all of it. Sure, I'd made it across. But my dignity was still sitting back there, sinking with that stupid pelt.

And as we left the nest and went outside, I was still processing that that'd even *happened*. It was how it always went – I thought I was doing okay, and then another one of those episodes jumped on me like an ambush.

Except, this time, it had happened in front of cats outside of my family. *Speaking of family...* I then thought. *Thornclaw is going to flip out when he hears about this...*

This time, it had happened in front of Bramblestar, for StarClan's sake! That thought made me nearly want to whimper with helplessness. *Goodness, he's probably questioning his decision to pick me as deputy now!*

I then began to shake my head as I made my way through the broken fence. *I mean, it's only been about a moon and a half, anyway. He could probably make the switch without doing much harm...*

I then let out a huff, feeling so unbelievably humiliated and frustrated still. *When is it going to end?* I thought exasperatedly. *Great StarClan, I just want to get home now.*

And because of that, I was almost *annoyed* when I heard the wail of a cat from the distance.

But that only lasted a moment, and my mind quickly went alert as I followed Bramblestar, who had pelted away as soon as we'd heard the noise.

As soon as I caught up to the ThunderClan leader, I followed his gaze to see him looking off at a brown she-cat, who was standing near the Twoleg den, staring down at a transparent barrier below her. "What's wrong?" Bramblestar then called out. "Can we help?"

I then blinked in surprise as the kittypet let out a hiss. "Stay out of this!"

Bramblestar and I exchanged a reluctant glance, but ran over to join the she-cat despite what she'd barked at us.

She luckily didn't swipe at us once we were next to her, and we both looked down to see that a gray tabby tom was trapped on the other side of this transparent barrier. He was looking up at all of us, his blue eyes wide and full of fear. *Oh my goodness, the poor thing...*

Bramblestar was shaking his head next to me. "There must be a way to get him out of there."

"What would you know about it, flea-pelt?" the brown tabby she-cat nearly growled.

Bramblestar stared at the she-cat with narrowed eyes – he clearly wasn't phased by her indignation. "I've seen stuff like this before."

"Me too. Too many times. Flea-pelt isn't the only one," I meowed. And as Bramblestar sniffed and rolled his eyes, I pressed my forepaws against the top of the transparent barrier, and I let out a grunt of satisfaction as I actually managed to make it swing inward, opening a narrow gap at the bottom.

But it for sure wasn't wide enough for even the little tom to get through. "Shoot..." I muttered.

The brown she-cat stepped forward. "Press harder," she meowed, beginning to press against the barrier, and Bramblestar and me joining her soon after. "Frankie, you push from the bottom!"

And thank StarClan with all of us doing the work, the little tabby tom – named *Frankie*, I guessed – was able to squeeze out. His pelt was bristling and his eyes glared with a mixture of fury and terror, and his poor pelt was soaked up to his belly fur.

But despite that, his meow was full of enthusiasm. "Thanks!" he purred to us. "I thought I was going to drown!"

To my surprise, the brown she-cat then let out a sigh of relief.

"Yeah, thanks," she meowed evenly. "I'm Jessy, and this is Frankie."

Bramblestar gave a nod to both cats. "I'm Bramblestar, and this is Lilypetal." He then nodded towards Jessy. "You're pretty brave, for a kittypet."

At those words, I flashed the brown tabby tom an amused, but concerned look.

"Really?" Jessy then purred, her eyes narrowing. "Well, you keep a pretty civil tongue in your head, for a wild cat."

My eyes also narrowed. "I think we all need to get past our stereotypes..." I muttered, probably too quietly for anyone to hear.

I then looked over my shoulder as I heard pawsteps come from behind us, seeing the rest of the patrol likely checking on what was going on.

I had to hold back a purr as Lionblaze dropped his blanket, letting out a groan. "Great StarClan! More kittypets!"

"Jessy, have you seen Benny?" Frankie's voice was sharp with panic. "I saw him get washed away when the water came. I couldn't reach him!"

Jessy's ears flicked back. "No, I haven't. I'm sorry."

Frankie turned toward Bramblestar and me, his eyes wide with desperation. "Have you seen him? He's my brother—a tabby like me, but darker."

Bramblestar shook his head. "No, sorry." I could only shake mine as well, unable to find my voice. My chest ached just imagining the fear he must be feeling.

"Look," Bramblestar continued gently, "why don't you come back to our camp? There's food there, and—"

"No!" Frankie snapped, bristling. "I have to stay here, in case Benny comes back."

Bramblestar shared a look with Jessy. "We can't hang around here, but we'd like to help. Can you persuade Frankie to come with us? He looks ill, and there are cats in our camp who can help him."

"It's much safer," I added softly, trying to sound as encouraging as possible, "and *dryer*."

Jessy narrowed her eyes at Frankie. "Are you flea-brained? These cats just saved your life. The least you can do is go with them, so you can get better."

Frankie's shoulders sagged, and his voice broke in defeat. "Okay."

With that, we then began to lead the two kittypets away from the nest and towards ThunderClan territory. Of course, a few of us had left our pelts with the discovery of Frankie and Jessy, and had to pick them back up on our way out.

As we did so, I was amused to see Jessy's eyes wide with surprise. "What are you doing?" she asked. "You *stole* these blankets from the Twolegs?"

"We did!" Bramblestar purred, nodding towards me. "Lilypetal's idea. She used to be a kittypet like you."

Jessy then nodded to me, her gaze now full of admiration. "Encouraging wild cats to steal from Twolegs, huh? I like your style!" She then nodded to Bramblestar. "And you're enabling it? You must be a cool leader."

Bramblestar and I exchanged an amused glance, and then led the way as we traveled back to the tunnels. "Hm..." I murmured once our two new ThunderClan members were out of earshot. "She's clearly taken a liking to you!"

I then found my eyes narrowing. "You clearly admire her a bit too. Think she's pretty brave for a kittypet?"

Bramblestar gave a purr and rolled his eyes. "Come on, you have to admit that you don't see that too often. We definitely see more Mintys than Jessys whenever we run into kittypets."

"That's true," I agreed with a shrug.

"And don't worry, Squirrelflight is the only one for me and always will be," the ThunderClan leader reassured me, thank goodness. "I can just appreciate someone who manages to still be so brave during a time like this."

"I suppose so!" I meowed. I then had to suppress a frustrated sigh. *Someone who doesn't freeze while crossing the water and collecting supplies for their Clan...*

Bramblestar then let out a sniff. "I was actually thinking that she reminded me a lot of you," the leader admitted, to my surprise. "Even before you were a Clan cat, you weren't scared of us – you just wanted our approval. I mean, you were wary, as you should be, but always ready to speak up for yourself."

He then gave me a light nudge. "And of course, brave and feisty through everything too, even when you didn't need to be."

I stared back at the leader for a moment, shocked by the kind words. "Well, thank you! That means *so* much, but..." I then let out a sigh, the reality of earlier sinking into my bones all over again. "I don't know if I'd call myself brave today, Bramblestar."

The dark brown tom began to shake his head, flashing me a reassuring amber glance. "Don't worry about the incident inside of the nest, Lilypetal," he then insisted to me. "Seriously. It happens to the best of us."

"I'll take your word for it."

And I tried to relay Bramblestar's words over and over as we got deeper into the forest. Goodness gracious, everything he'd said to me felt like such a high compliment, and actually, I felt somewhat reassured about what the ThunderClan leader thought of me. Not fully, but somewhat.

And actually, I couldn't help but feel a bit of *envy* and *sadness* – the way that Bramblestar described me? The way that Jessy was? That's who I felt like I *used* to be. Now I froze during battle, crossing

things like a *broom*, and even something as simple during a border patrol. I was tired and anxious *all* of the time, and felt dejected about every mistake I made. *Which, I guess I should, considering just how much those mistakes and incidents are making me look even worse...*

This was a reality I could hardly fathom. And honestly, I had *no* idea when I would get better. Or *how*.

Chapter 17

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I was almost paranoid that my breathing was going to be too loud as I lied awake in the makeshift warriors den – it was practically dead quiet, and while I couldn't be sure, I assumed it was approaching moonhigh outside.

I couldn't sleep, and was doing nothing but letting my gray eyes flit around the den. Most of my Clanmates were fast asleep as far I could tell.

But *also* as far as I could tell, some of the cats I was closest to were for sure *not* asleep. Poor Bramblestar, for one, was stirring in his nest with Squirrelflight as if he was going to get killed if he laid still. *And no wonder... he became leader just over a moon ago and all of the sudden our camp is full of water and sticks,* I thought. *And then we're staying down here in the tunnels, and then we lost Seedpaw...*

A shiver then ran down my spine. *And it's only been just under a quarter moon... how?*

I then shifted my gaze over to my parents' nest, and just as I had expected, Lilypetal's eyes were closed, but she was as silly as a mole trying to wander outside at night if she believed I thought she was asleep. Her breathes were fast and shallow, and her eyebrows were furrowed. And not many other cats could tell, but I knew her thoughts were spiraling.

Thornclaw was pressed right up against her, and I could tell he was doing everything he could to make my mother as comfortable as possible in their nest – his flank pressed right up against hers, his tail wrapped around her back and his muzzle pressed into her cheek. *But Lilypetal is probably so lost in her thoughts that she doesn't notice it...*

I then glanced over at my son and former apprentice's nest. The two younger cats were also curled up together. And listen, if I wasn't sure that any other cats were appearing to be asleep but faking it, I could be sure if my son was.

He was definitely asleep, but I knew he was deep into some nightmare, or an uncomfortable dream at least. He was gently shifting in his nest, his eyebrows also furrowed with his eyelids slightly fluttering.

I couldn't help but narrow my eyes back at him, remembering that he'd shared he was still having nightmares. *About that sick, crowfood-eating murderer...* I then thought. *Hopefully that's all...*

I then gave a shake of my head. *Stop it. Swiftflight proved himself a long time ago, and has done so every day since he left that gosh-darn Dark Forest and will continue to.*

Finally, broke my gaze away from the large cluster of Clanmates, letting out a long, but quiet sigh. *Geez, why do things feel just as tense and uncomfortable as they did when we were anticipating the Dark Forest arriving?* I asked myself worriedly as I lied my head on my paws. *The aftermath... mixed with this flood, is proving to be just as trying as the actual thing, in a way.*

I then just slightly flicked my gaze over to the dusty gray pelt lying a few mouse-lengths away from me. *And not having my mate right next to me definitely makes it all a bit tougher...* I then thought. *But... I just can't.*

Don't get me wrong, the argument that Dustystorm and I had had a couple of days ago over Breezepelt wasn't relationship-ending by any means. I didn't want that to be the case at all, but at the same time, what he had said hurt me so much. The fact that he didn't trust me, and thought that I would just give into Breezepelt... that's not something I would get over so quickly.

Had he tried to talk to me about it since? Of course. It was Dustystorm.

Was I maybe overreacting just a bit? Of course. I'm Goldenshine.

But I still needed some space. Even if it was just coming from a place of worry on Dustystorm's part, I didn't care.

And I had no idea what would make my mate feel better about the situation, I suppose, and needed space to figure out how I could fix this rift in our relationship. My clear actions to push Breezepelt away hadn't even been enough. For Dustystorm, or Breezepelt himself. *So what the heck do I do?* I asked myself as my blood seemed to warm with deep frustration. *Continue to ignore him? Hope that he'll eventually take the hint?*

I then shifted uncomfortably. *...Tell him to stay away?*

I then shook my head. *That would mean going out of my way to talk to him though. I don't want to do that.*

I then shifted my gaze back to Swiftflight, who still seemed to be deep into his dream. *But I have to do something. Swiftflight is involved too, and it sounds like he wants Breezepelt as far away as possible too... at least, I hope.*

I then let out a huff, and without giving it a second thought, I quickly stood out of my nest and walked out as swiftly but quietly as I could.

When I made it out to what could be considered as the "clearing" in our camp, it was fully empty except for Molewhisker, who was standing guard next to the tunnel entrance. We locked gazes, exchanged a nod, and then I made my way towards him to head out to the forest.

I gave the younger tom another nod as I passed him. "I'll be back in a little while. Just making a quick trip."

"A quick trip?"

I paused in my pawsteps, whipping my head over my shoulder and my eyebrows raising to see the dusty gray pelt of Dustystorm padding towards me, his pale blue eyes practically glowing in the dark with concern. "Where in the name of StarClan are you going? Are you okay?"

I flicked a slightly sheepish gaze towards Molewhisker before running down to meet my mate. "I'm fine," I reassured Dustystorm evenly. "I'm... I'm just going to the Moonpool."

"The *Moonpool?* Right now?" my mate pressed, his eyes still wide. "Don't you usually go with Jayfeather, and... *not* in the middle of the night?"

I let out a frustrated sigh. "Yes, but this is a spontaneous trip." I then let out a snort. "Jayfeather would slice me in half if I woke him up."

The confusion and panic in Dustystorm's eyes was getting more apparent with every heartbeat. "I don't know if I like you going out by yourself right now, Goldenshine," my mate then whispered. "In the dark with all of the flooding... Can I at least come with you?"

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to decide how to respond. *Considering you may be coming up in the discussion I plan to have... that may be tricky.* "I'll be fine, Dustystorm. I promise. Just go back to sleep," I then meowed, actually feeling affection at seeing the tom's worry.

"But why do you have to do this right now?" Dustystorm continued to press, taking a step closer to me. "I... can't be there with you?"

I let out another sigh, shaking my head. "No! I..." I then trailed off as something dawned on me.

I then couldn't help but narrow my eyes back at my mate, anger seeming to slowly bubble up inside of me. "I'm not going out to meet with Breezepelt, if that's what you're worried about."

Dustystorm immediately closed his eyes, letting out a huff. "Goldenshine, that is *not* what I meant!"

"No, no! Me leaving in the middle of the night, sneaking off, by myself, I get it!" I meowed to the tom in a mockingly cheerful voice. "What else would I be doing? Apparently I don't have the capacity or restraint *not* to do that."

"Goldenshine... I-"

"No! That's okay! You've made yourself quite clear," I cut my mate off, giving him one last disappointed look before turning away. "I really am going to the Moonpool, and I'm going to speak with Snowflight. If you don't believe me, I guess that's your right."

I then heard the tom let out an exasperated sigh behind me, and feeling the slightest twinge of guilt, I paused and looked over my shoulder back at my mate. I was met with a frustrated, yet pleading gaze that admittedly made my heart sink a little. "I'll be back in just a little while," I then meowed a bit more softly before turning back around and making my way outside.

A chill ran down my spine almost as soon as I was met with the moonlight. As unfortunate as the situation was that the flood had brought us, it certainly made for a whole new experience when being out in the forest. While the most extreme of the flooding had gone down, everything was still muddy and slick. But that made things like the tree trunks, leaves, and grass practically glow in the moonlight. And with so many creatures being scared off, the forest was eerily quiet.

It's likely I would have enjoyed my travel to the Moonpool if the ground wasn't so mushy.

Because, yes, I actually *was* going to the Moonpool, and I was seeing Snowflight. I felt like I needed her guidance right now more than anything now that I could have it so easily.

And I attempted to persevere, cling onto that, and not cringe with every pawstep as I then began to travel along the ThunderClan and WindClan border.

I had to admit, I was treading carefully, and not just because of the mud. It was the middle of the night, so I like had nothing... or no *one* to worry about running into.

So, as you would expect, seeing a flash of black in the distance made my heart drop for a moment, and my paws abruptly come to a stop. *Shoot.*

I then slowly began to back up, shifting my back and forth to find

the nearest bushes to hide behind. *Shoot, shoot, shoot.*

With in a single heartbeat, my heart was beating at double the speed as I then crouched down behind some brambles.

I had no idea what to do.

I mean, I had no reason to believe that the cat I was seeing *wasn't* the cat that I'd been adamantly avoiding. *And Breezepelt wandering out in the forest by himself is not a foreign concept... at all.*

So, when the black pelt turned around and I saw a flash of green eyes reflecting against the moon, I nearly collapsed back onto the ground in relief.

And all of the sudden, hiding was the *last* thing I wanted to do. *Nightwing, I swear to StarClan...*

I stood up from my hiding spot, not caring how much my legs and flank brushed up against the brambles and made noise. "Hm, fancy meeting you here," I then called out, my voice echoing through the trees.

The black she-cat froze as her green eyes fell on me. "Goldenshine!" she exclaimed in complete astonishment. "What in the name of StarClan are you doing here?"

Her gaze then sharpened and practically pierced my fur. "Did you *follow* me here?"

"What? No!" I snapped back.

"Then why were you hiding in those brambles?"

I let out a frustrated huff. "I-" I then immediately cut myself off. "I..."

I then lowered my head slightly, giving a shrug. "I thought you were a WindClan cat or something..." I then meowed more quietly, my heart suddenly feeling heavy as I realized that I hadn't told Nightwing about *any* of the Breezepelt stuff since it had begun.

Nightwing had been one of the few cats in ThunderClan that I had

been comfortable telling about the idiot that I'd somehow once called my mate. *But... she's been so distant that I haven't been able to say a word to her about him trying to speak to me again...* I realized.

I then forced myself to meet Nightwing's gaze again, surprised to see her eyebrows furrowed, as if she knew I was withholding information. *But... so is she.*

I then took a deep breath. *Speaking of...* "So you're saying that I'd have a reason to follow you?" I then asked my friend.

Nightwing rolled her eyes, letting out a groan as she brushed past me. "Don't even try with that, Goldenshine. Stop playing dumb."

"*You* stop playing dumb!" I retorted back to the she-cat. "You know that Dustystorm and I have been worried about you for a while now, and the fact that you constantly give us *nothing* doesn't help matters. You getting defensive so easily certainly doesn't either." *And we've caught you in a lie once already. You're digging a hole deeper and deeper, and sometime you're going to slip,* I thought, but didn't dare say out loud.

I then padded forward to catch up with Nightwing. "It's an easy question. Why are you out here?"

Nightwing luckily stopped in her tracks. "Why are *you* out here?"

I narrowed my eyes back at her. "I'm going to the Moonpool." I then looked at the black she-cat up and down. "Your turn again."

Nightwing's gaze shifted to the side for just a moment. "I'm hunting."

"Really?"

"Really!"

I simply stared at her for a moment. She wasn't carrying a darn thing. "No luck, huh?"

"No," my friend quickly snapped back, her gaze beginning to flit around the forest. "The flood continues to take everything away..."

I gave her the lightest nod. "I suppose so," I muttered, hoping that my gray gaze was burning *deep* into her pelt. "It's certainly take *you* away a *lot*."

Nightwing stared back at me, and I thought I could maybe see a flash of hurt in her eyes, but I pushed on. "I wish you'd tell me what you're up to, Nightwing."

"I'm not up to anything, Goldenshine!"

"Then why do you avoid me and Dustystorm like we're the worst cases of greencough in existence?" I then pressed to my Clanmates, my voice rising and echoing through the forest once again. "And wander off by yourself *all* of the time?"

When Nightwing only hesitated, I found my anger only rose, and actually, the same confusion and betrayal I'd once felt in the past seemed to take over. "I know what it's like for someone close to me to be this evasive and secretive, Nightwing, and they certainly didn't do it just for the fun of it." *And not being able to be someone that they could come to about it hurts so, so much.* A chill ran down my spine, my heart feeling heavy as I thought back to that awful time when my own *son* couldn't say a word to me. *Especially when you thought your connection was unbreakable.*

When Nightwing continued to be silent, her eyes now wide with panic, I found I could simply let out a frustrated huff and pad past her, trying to push down my current feelings of confusion and betrayal. "I hope you don't let this secret push away everyone in your life that cares about you until you almost have nothing left," I hissed at her as I continued to walk away. "You're lucky that I'm in a hurry. Get back to camp safely."

This isn't over, though.

After I had traveled a few fox-lengths, I couldn't help but glance over my shoulder, luckily seeing Nightwing appear to be traveling towards the tunnels.

I let out a sniff, turning my head back around. *Hm... she's in for a nice surprise if Dustystorm is still standing near the camp entrance...*

I then paused in my steps once again after just a couple of heartbeats. *Hm...*

It only took me a moment to realize I was walking *right* on the scent trail that Nightwing had literally just created during her travel back to camp. And that Nightwing left a *scent trail. Oh my goodness, I could follow this and figure out exactly where she went! No rain this time!*

I narrowed my eyes, staring off at the path she likely had come down.

I then shifted my gaze to my right, along the WindClan border, the path that led to the Moonpool.

I then closed my eyes, letting out a frustrated huff. *As much as I want to follow it, I don't think I can right now,* I told myself. *I came for the Moonpool, and that's where I'm going.*

However, I couldn't help but return my gaze to Nightwing's supposed path again as I gave a contemplative lash of my tail. I only barely recognized the path, and had only padded along it once. *That's the path Thornclaw led us through to get to the Twolegplace when we went to rescue Lilypetal from that nest...* I realized.

I then let out a grunt. *The Twolegplace... hm...*

I then gave a shake of my head and continued my travel towards the Moonpool, reminding myself that time was only passing by the more that I thought. *Well, I don't even know for sure if she's going that far,* I told myself. *But I know where to start...*

And I had to violently push down curiosity as I continued to travel along the WindClan border, of course still staying cautious of... *anyone* that might be wandering around, trying to forget about the Nightwing situation for now.

As much as I was worried about my friend, I really, *really* needed my sister and her guidance right now, and I hopefully would be receiving that.

~>~>~>~>~

No matter how many times I went to the Moonpool, its beauty and brilliance never failed to absolutely blow me away – the shimmering water, the stones around it that seemed to sparkle, and the glaring presence of StarClan that was *overwhelming* as soon as you walk into the clearing.

As soon as I had arrived, I hadn't hesitated to crouch down, touch my nose to the water, and lie down in front of the bright aqua water.

And I don't know if StarClan could sense my desperation, or if maybe I was just so tired and emotionally exhausted that my body dragged me right into sleep, but it seemed that I was lying on soft grass and being surrounded by glowing trees and shrubs within heartbeats. *Thank StarClan... seriously.*

As the StarClan forest fully came into sight, I let out a relieved sigh and rose to my paws.

I then narrowed my eyes. *Being here is cool and all...* I then thought after I stood alone for several moments. *But where is-*

"Looking for me?"

I then flicked my ears, letting out an excited gasp and turning around to see the white, fluffy pelt of Snowflight. As usual, her ice blue eyes were warm, welcoming, and absolutely everything that I needed to see right now.

As soon as our gazes met, I gave my sister a smug look. "No, I was not looking for you, actually," I teased. "I was looking for *Snowflight*, who I expected to meet me as soon as I woke up here. I think I'm speaking with Slowflight instead."

Snowflight gave a roll of her eyes. "Goodness gracious, I came as quickly as I could. I wasn't expecting you," she sighed. She then gave a tilt of her had. "Aren't you and Jayfeather coming in about a quarter moon?"

I sighed and stared down at my paws for a moment. "Yes, but..." My voice trailed off as I then lifted my head to meet her gaze.

Something must've changed in my eyes, because suddenly Snowflight's expression softened into worry and sympathy. "I *really* needed to see you now."

Then, without another word, Snowflight ran up to me, pressing her head against mine as I let out a shaky huff.

I leaned into her touch. "Snowflight, everything feels so confusing and absurd right now, and... I'm so sick of it." Snowflight then stepped back, her eyes huge with concern as she listened. "You know I'm always one to face situations head on without a problem..." I then went on.

Snowflight's ice blue eyes narrowed. "Like into a collapsing tunnel?" she then cut in.

"That's a very literal example, but yes," I murmured. Snowflight then let out a small purr and gestured with her tail for me to go on. "And I guess I would face everything I'm dealing with head-on... if I even knew what to do."

I then shook my head quickly as something dawned on me. "Wait, do you even know what I'm talking about?"

Snowflight gave me a bemused look. "You really think I'm not going to take a look into your life if I don't have the opportunity?"

I stared intently at my sister. "Okay, so you know about that stupid WindClan tom who'd be breathing down my neck if he had the choice?"

"Oh, yeah."

"And my whole situation with Dustystorm?"

"Absolutely. Goldenshine," Snowflight then sighed as she shook her head slowly in amazement. "I'm so sorry you're dealing with all of this."

"Oh, trust me, me too," I muttered, letting out a frustrated huff. "Great StarClan, I'm not equipped to deal with this kind of thing... not anymore! Don't even get me started on all of the flood nonsense

and Nightwing being so weird." Snowflight rolled her eyes, nodding with a sigh as I went on. "Things were so easy for the longest time. Breezepelt was evil. That was hard to swallow at first, but I got past it. Swiftflight and I were fine. Dustystorm and I were happy. Everything was simple. Why can't he just leave us all alone?"

My voice slowly began to rise with frustration. "If I don't do anything, things are bad. If I do anything, things could get worse. I just..." I sighed again, shoulders slumping. "Snowflight, I'm exhausted, and I have no idea how to deal with this. I needed your help as soon as I could get it."

Snowflight gave a soft nod, clearly trying to take in everything I'd spat out. "And I'm so, so glad to give it to you, Goldenshine. And..." Her voice trembled as she drew in a deep, shaky breath. "You have no idea how much I wish I could be right by your side down there during all of this."

With those words, I suddenly found myself having to blink back emotion in my eyes. "Me too," I then nearly whispered. "But you're here now. We didn't even have that before."

Snowflight nodded, her own eyes glittering with emotion. "That's true." She then took another deep breath. "Okay." She gathered her thoughts for a moment, then gave a sharp nod. "Well, Goldenshine, I can't even imagine how frustrating this is for you. This is a complicated situation."

"No kidding."

"And listen," she went on, her eyes suddenly glowing with certainty. "I know you feel like whatever choice you make is going to be detrimental, but... I encourage you to keep an open mind. There is a choice to be made here, and a path to be chosen, but it just might not be the one that feels the safest or the easiest. And..." She drew another deep breath. "You may find out it's not the one you're currently taking."

I couldn't help but let out a frustrated sigh. "Snowflight, I do not see a world in which that feels right."

"That's your right, I suppose," my sister then said firmly. She then tilted her head, her gaze full of inquiry. "But... Goldenshine, even the blackest nights give way to dawn, don't they?"

I groaned, flicking my ears back. "Darn it, do your words have to be cryptic now that you're in StarClan? You used to give the best advice."

"I am giving you the best advice, mouse-brain!" Snowflight gently snapped back at me. "And anyway, if I tell you exactly what you need to do, how will you grow?"

I then raised my eyebrows as her gaze became more intense. "Come on, even if the right decision seems obvious to someone, they sometimes have to let others make their own choices."

She then gave me a firm nod, ignoring the massive eye roll that I gave her. "Trust me—I am laying it out for you."

Both of us simultaneously flicked our ears as a single bright flicker glimmered around us.

I let out a loud, obnoxious groan. "Great," I muttered as another flash came. "That's the StarClan way, I guess—waking cats up as soon as they become confused beyond belief because of their words."

"Just think it over," Snowflight called as everything around us began to fade, including her. Her voice was already growing faint.

"Keep an open mind, Goldenshine! Please!"

Everything then went completely dark, and the next thing I knew, my eyes fly open, and I was staring down at the shimmering water in the Moonpool once again. It was still very dark, but above me, the sky had turned into a mix of purple and navy, and the morning birds – the ones still around, anyway – had already begun chirping. Dawn would be approaching soon.

And with that realization, I stood up, letting out an exhausted sigh. I had to admit, I was a *little* frustrated, and I guess I should have expected that the advice I'd get was going to be a bit complicated.

And when was I even going to have time to mull it over?

And my head was shaking slowly in bewilderment as I began my travel back down into the forest, my teeth barred slightly as I trudged through the mud along the WindClan border. *Keep an open mind – how generic can someone get?* I then thought to myself. *But it's Snowflight...*

This thought made me slow in my pawsteps. *When she says it, you don't take it lightly*, I told myself. *And when you pair that with "even the blackest nights give away to dawn," I guess that's something too.*

I then let out a huff, quickening my pace again. *I'm not stupid. Snowflight is trying to tell me that even cats like Breezepelt can change, but... do I even want to risk engaging with him on the off chance that that happens? Snowflight did say that I have a choice. But-*

I then abruptly came to a stop as I heard what sounded like a twig snapping ahead of me. *Uh, oh.*

I stood in my spot, pricking my ears as I attempted to listen for anything else.

Silence. For several heartbeats. A chill even ran down my spine from how quiet it was for a moment.

And I eventually pushed myself to proceed on, my eyes shifting back and forth every so often.

Until I paused again, hearing rustles in some bushes... *over on the WindClan side...* I realized quickly, reluctantly shifting my gaze over towards the moors.

I then gave a shake of my head, padding forward once again. *You're just freaking yourself out again, Goldenshine*, I told myself. I knew that it was likely a cat from the heaviness of the movement and the lack of prey *anywhere, but it could be* any *WindClan cat wandering around.*

I then blinked a few times, giving a quick shake of my head as I proceeded in a light trot. *Why am I letting this scare me?* I then asked myself. *Even if that is him over there, I can handle it.*

I then gave a proud, sharp nod. *If I cower away from the tom that should be cowering at* me*, then my name isn't-*

"Goldenshine!"

I stopped in my tracks once again, and for a moment I was almost certain that the ground had collapsed from beneath me.

I knew that voice that echoed through the forest behind me. Unfortunately, I knew it better than most.

I couldn't believe it – it was one of those times where the worst case scenario was *actually* happening.

And despite my previous thoughts, I didn't want to turn around to confirm what I already knew. *But this isn't cowering*, I told myself. *This is standing my ground.*

I then narrowed my eyes for a moment. ...*While walking.*

Without even looking over my shoulder, I continued forward, screwing my eyes shut for a moment as I heard quick pawsteps coming up from behind me.

And I nearly let out a hiss as Breezepelt's scent flowed into my nose, and from what I could tell, he was now just a couple of fox-lengths on my tail.

"Goldenshine! Wait, please!" His voice sounded like a hoarse mouse that had shoved a pile of dirt down its throat as his pawsteps pounded the earth. "Can you not give me a moment?"

I didn't even look back. My tail lashed as I kept moving forward. I could not *believe* this was even happening. "You have given *me* no reason to give you that."

I then heard him let out a sigh. "I know, you're right. But—"

"Alright, you acknowledge it," I interrupted, still staring ahead. "Glad you're self-aware. Case closed."

"Goldenshine, for StarClan's sake, can you stop so I can quit looking

like an idiot chasing you?"

That comment filled me with so much rage that I spun around before I even realized it. My fur practically burned as my gaze then locked with his amber eyes. "That is what you get, Breezepelt," I hissed. "You get to look like an idiot, and you've looked and acted like nothing but an idiot for StarClan knows how long."

I was shocked by how much pleading was in the WindClan tom's gaze. "I know, but-"

"Go away!" I cut him off with a growl. "Why couldn't you see from the other day that I don't want to talk to you? You've already messed enough things up without saying hardly anything up until this point." I then turned sharply, ready to stalk off.

So, as you could imagine, I was then absolutely bewildered when Breezepelt ran ahead, intercepting me and stopping in front of me. "Goldenshine, I am begging you. I really need to talk to you."

I seriously thought that the brambles next to us would burst into flames from how hot I felt. I bunched my muscles, ready to leap past him. "Get out of my way, you fox-heart!"

"You're really just going to run away from me and send me away for the rest of your life?" the tom challenged me.

"I have no reason to do anything else!"

"Can you let me give you a reason?"

I narrowed my eyes and flicked my ears at those words, heat bubbling in my chest. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Breezepelt's eyes flashed with alarm for a moment before he rolled his amber eyes. "Goldenshine, I'm not coming onto you. I'm not stupid," he then meowed quickly.

"Thank StarClan," I muttered under my breath.

"But I need to talk to you," he then continued. "I've tried to talk to Swiftflight already."

"Oh, trust me. I know." My lip curled. "Are you going to try and tell me the same thing you told him? You've changed, you're sorry, you're trying to right your wrongs? It's *foxdung*."

"At least Swiftflight took the time to hear me out—however he may have responded afterwards," Breezepelt pointed out, his gaze dark with contempt. "You're not even letting me get a word out!"

"As I shouldn't," I shot back. "And how Swiftflight responded afterwards was exactly what he should have done. I'm shocked he even gave you that much time!" My tail lashed again as I started padding away. "No reason you give me could make me see you any differently. And as far as what you told Swiftflight? It's all fluff to me."

I then just barely looked over my shoulder back at the tom. "Leave my son alone, by the way!"

"*Your* son?" His voice cracked, and when I glanced at him, I swore I saw hurt flicker in his eyes. For a heartbeat I almost wondered if I was being too harsh, but I shoved that thought aside.

"You heard me," I said flatly. "And he wants to stay away from you just as much as I do." My ears flicked back as suspicion rose. "How did you even find me out here? Did you seriously—"

"I didn't follow you here..." he interrupted, sounding exasperated.

"Then what the heck are you even doing out here?"

"Great StarClan, Goldenshine, how do you think we first met at all?"

"Whatever!" I spat, the words flying out like thorns. "After all that you've put me through—what you've done to me, to Dustystorm, and the way you betrayed the Clans—I'm sorry that day ever happened. I've thought that for a long time." I looked back at him, and I hoped my gaze was as cold as the peaks of the mountains. "Don't come near me again, Breezepelt. You can choke on your own words."

And with that, I whipped around and padded off, not giving him another glance.

And I practically felt as if I was on fire as I practically stomped deeper into ThunderClan territory and towards the tunnels. Despite what Snowflight had said to me, the *last* thing I wanted to do was keep an open mind or *see the dawn.* That became clear to me as soon as I heard Breezepelt's *voice*.

I had experienced what felt like an eternal night when it came to Breezepelt, one of those nights where you tossed and turned, and like you could never be at ease and fall asleep. Like dawn would never come.

It was so hard to feel like Snowflight's words had any merit, as much as I wanted to believe that they did.

Somewhere deep inside me, a tiny, stubborn part tugged at me and made me still want to trust her. Part of me wished I could even have an open mind about Breezepelt. But the rest of me - the part that burned with betrayal - was certain that dawn would indeed never break. There were too many stakes in even trying to give him a chance.

And anyway, right now, it felt as if I could never, ever, look into those amber eyes and feel anything other than anger.

Chapter 18

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I wasn't sure how much longer I could deal with this.

These images of my past and these nightmares that did nothing but dig up all of the horrible feelings and fake satisfaction that I'd felt when I was an apprentice.

Like I'd told Cherryfall, I somewhat *wanted* to be reminded of my past so that I could see how far that I had come.

But at this point, I was getting worried that these nightmares and how they were making me feel would bleed into my "awake" life as they had when I was training in the Dark Forest.

I'd actually decided to try and get some sleep tonight at my mate's urging, and I already regretted it.

I hadn't had a chance to talk to Leafpool or Jayfeather yet like I'd told Ivypool that I would, but great StarClan, I definitely wanted to now.

But unfortunately for me, conversations in general the past few days that had any worth weren't happening. There truthfully hadn't been a lot of down time since ThunderClan had moved into these tunnels, especially since we'd now welcomed *three* kittypets into our camp. I'd been helping the three cats – Jessy, Minty and Frankie get settled, attempted to find any prey that I could out in the forest, and had been assisting in keeping the camp livable. It was hard – these tunnels gave us a living situation that wasn't and shouldn't be long term.

There was hardly time to relax, let alone have a lengthy conversation. *But after this latest nightmare, I wonder if I should* make *time.*

In this one, I actually had been in the *ThunderClan* forest, not the Dark Forest. I could be sure of that, as weird as it was.

And as always, there were those blue eyes, staring deep into my own, glowing with that malicious and evil invitation that threatened me closer. Just like I had in the Dark Forest, I was full of feelings of anger, guilt, fear, dread...

But more than anything, I was able to feel my own frustration and rage that these nightmares were *still happening*. In that moment, as I continued to stare back at those eyes, it felt like I could just leap forward and *scratch them out*. And maybe if I did, these dreams would *finally* go away.

And I had been just heartbeats from doing that when I woke up – my fur bristled, my claws unsheathed and sinking into the moss, and my heart pounding in my ears.

StarClan's kits...

The first thing that I did once I fully gained consciousness and let my mind spiral with anger for a few moments was glance down at Cherryfall, so worried for a moment that I'd woken her up.

Thankfully, my mate was somehow still fast asleep, as well as a good amount of my Clanmates in the warriors den. But from the amount of cats that were missing and from the stirring that I could hear outside, the day had begun, and the dawn patrol had either gone out or was about to go out.

I then found myself slowly shaking my head as I blankly turned to look towards the den entrance. *All I can be sure of right now is that I need some time to clear my head*, I then told myself as I let out a quiet huff. *And time permitting, I'll stop by Jayfeather and Leafpool's den when I get back.*

I then slowly got up from my nest, briefly stroking Cherryfall's flank with my tail and giving her a lick on the head. *She's going to hate hearing that I didn't sleep well. Again,* I then though as I began making my way out of the warriors den. *She'll hate hearing even more that I'm staying awake now to avoid sleep...*

I glanced over my shoulder once again, checking that the ginger tabby she-cat was still asleep. And once I confirmed that she was, I found my gaze shifting towards my mother's nest.

My eyes narrowed immediately when I saw Dustystorm there stirring, but Goldenshine was gone. *That is very weird*, I thought. *She's never up this early unless she is chosen for the dawn patrol...*

I then gave a quick shake of my head. *And maybe she was,* I told myself as I faced forward once again and left the den. *Calm down, mouse-brain.*

And I made it out into the clearing to see that, sure enough, a few cats were surrounding Lilypetal as she appeared to be sending them off for the dawn patrol.

I was right about *that*, but my heart sank when I quickly realized that Goldenshine wasn't among the group.

I narrowed my eyes once again, letting them flit around the tunnels just in case my mother was doing as my mother did – doing something that didn't make any sense. *She'd somehow have some logical explanation for standing in a dark corner.*

But she was still nowhere to be found, and this made me extremely nervous. I knew my mother, *thankfully*, and I knew that she wasn't one to leave camp unless she was on a *mission*, or something was really wrong. *I mean, I never received any explanation on what is going on with her and Dustystorm,* I then realized, their potential argument making my stomach twist. *Did they have some sort of blow-up?*

I then let out a snort. *I would have been woken up by the argument if Goldenshine was involved,* I told myself. *And anyway, the two of them have still been sleeping in the same nest the last few nights, so they don't hate each other's guts, right? But what do I know?*

I then told myself that I would just pray to StarClan that Goldenshine was alright, and that maybe I would just run into her while I was on my walk.

So, I began to pad towards the tunnel entrance, nodding to

Mousewhisker, Cinderheart, Lionblaze and Lilypetal as I went along. *And if I don't run into Goldenshine, maybe they will...*

They wouldn't.

As I was just about to crouch down and make my way outside, I was then shocked and startled as I was met with a flash of golden brown tabby fur, and I nearly ran right into my mother as she practically burst through the camp entrance.

I had to jump back as my mother nearly barreled into me through the tunnel. "Whoa! Watch it," I snapped, tail lashing as I steadied myself. "This tunnel's going to collapse with how hard you're stomping." I fell in step behind her, narrowing my eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

Goldenshine didn't look at me. "I'm fine, Swiftflight," she replied without slowing down.

I gave a short, disbelieving purr. "And every night I dream of Ashfur and me frolicking through a field of flowers." I then quickened my pace so that I was walking next to her. "Where were you?"

Still not looking at me, she answered, "The Moonpool."

"The Moonpool?" I repeated, blinking in surprise. "Why were you at the Moonpool?"

"I was stressed and needed some guidance, okay?"

"Okay," I murmured. "Did Snowflight claw you across the face or something?"

"No!" She whirled on me, huffing, her fur bristling so fiercely it stopped me in my tracks. "The Moonpool wasn't the problem... it was what happened after."

I narrowed my eyes back at the golden brown tabby she-cat, my heart beginning to beat faster. "Goldenshine, what happened after?"

My mother took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm herself. "I ran into Breezepelt." She then meowed. Her voice was low, but it shook

with rage.

And with that, my heart dropped like a heavy stone. "*What?*"

"Well, maybe," she muttered. "For all I know he tried to follow me out there."

"By himself?" I pressed, my voice beginning to rise as my head seemed to spin with anger. "In the middle of the night?"

"Exactly," Goldenshine replied, her voice taut. "He begged me to speak with him, and even intercepted me when I tried to get away."

I couldn't even speak. Heat roared through my pelt like fire spreading in dry grass.

"He even tried to guilt me," she went on, fury blazing in her gray eyes, "by saying that you at least listened to him when he tried to speak to you."

My claws unsheathed against the stone floor. "He tried to use *me* to get you to listen to him?"

"Clearly he'll try anything at this point!"

I began to shake my head, and I was certain that my claws would indent into the tunnel floor despite its denseness. "I cannot believe this. I cannot *believe* that he came after you like that. I told him..."

I then trailed off, and I shook my head, my chest heaving. This is definitely something that would make me angry, but I was still surprising myself. It had been bad enough that he'd tried to speak to her once, and I'd hoped that it would be a one-time thing.

I could not believe that Breezepelt had persisted, especially after I had directly told him not to.

I then looked back at Goldenshine, my tail lashing. "And he accuses *you* of not listening?" I then spat.

My mother shrugged sharply. "I mean, I guess he's not wrong! I wouldn't let him tell me a thing. I'm still shocked that you could

stand to hear his voice for more than a couple of heartbeats."

I sighed, closing my eyes for a moment. *I had wanted to grasp at any sign of integrity that came with Breezepelt's actions...* I thought to myself. *But him coming after my mother like this is not helping his case. At all.* "Somehow I did..." I murmured. My thoughts spiraled, but I forced myself to meet her gaze. "And you're sure you're okay?"

My mother sighed, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. "It's still fresh, and I'm still angry as all heck, but I'll be fine." She glanced down and lifted her paw with a scowl. "Ugh. I stepped on a thorn on my way back to camp - I was so blind with rage I didn't even notice the bush next to me. Jayfeather's going to need to take a look at this."

Could Breezepelt step on, let's say... five hundred?

When I didn't immediately reply, Goldenshine's gaze seemed to fill with worry. "Are you okay?" She asked me, her voice a bit softer.

I shook my head quickly. "I'm fine."

The she-cat then let out a snort. "And Jayfeather and I pick buttercups and giggle together in our free time," she muttered, half exasperated.

"Seriously, I'm okay." I flicked my nose toward the medicine den. "Go get your paw checked out."

She took a deep breath, her gaze reluctant as she looked back at me. "I'm going." She padded forward a few steps, then paused, glancing back. "Wait - you weren't standing right at the entrance of the tunnel for fun, right? Where are you heading off to?"

I thought for a moment, then flicked my tail dismissively. "Oh, I was just going to take a quick walk to clear my head... bad dream." I snorted. "I especially need the walk now."

"Totally understandable." She let out a little huff, then stepped forward and pressed her nose to my cheek. "Don't worry. I'm fine, and this will all pass. I love you."

I breathed out hard, mirroring her huff. "I love you too."

I then watched her go after she pulled away, my fur still warm and my head still racing. *This will all pass...* I repeated to myself.

I then felt my eyes narrow for a moment before closing them and letting out a sigh. *I wish I could believe that, but I can't.*

As much as I wished I could blow this off like I had the last time Breezepelt bothered Goldenshine, I just didn't think I could.

I had immediately felt like I had to act.

I was already praying to StarClan that I wasn't being impulsive.

I found my eyes shifting back towards the center of camp, where I saw Lilypetal now sitting down and sharing her morning meal with Thornclaw.

I supposed I should tell my kin and my deputy that I was going to be gone longer than I'd originally anticipated.

Without waiting another moment, I now found that *I* was the one stomping through camp, my fur still slightly bristled as I walked up to meet my older kin. My anger must have been *radiating*, because both of their heads shot in my direction before I fully made it to them.

And their hazel eyes and pale blue eyes were both slightly wide with concern by the time I came to a stop in front of them.

Lilypetal was the first to speak, her head tilted. "Good morning, Swiftflight?"

"Good morning, Lilypetal." I gave her a polite dip of my head, then glanced at her mate. "Thornclaw."

My gaze then shifted back to the ThunderClan deputy. "Lilypetal, what patrols did you plan to have me on today?" I pressed to her. "Any this morning? Or at sunhigh?"

She frowned at me, her whiskers twitching. "Well... I was maybe

going to send you out with Sandstorm and Cloudtail to hunt around sunhigh, when prey might be lingering. You three have some of the best noses in the Clan, so you might be able to find something for us."

"Okay." My eyes narrowed as I looked to the side. "Around sunhigh, you said? Or a bit after?"

I then heard Thornclaw give a snort. "Does someone else require your services this morning?"

I shook my head quickly. "No, no. I was just going to step out for a little bit to take a walk, and I was checking on when I should be back." *It's not a lie...*

My stomach twisted as Thornclaw and Lilypetal exchanged a look. "You want to take a walk from now until *after* sunhigh?" Thornclaw asked, his voice rising with concern.

My ears flicked in panic. "Give or take," I said quickly. "I'm... I'm not sure how long I'll be gone."

Lilypetal's eyes narrowed. "Well, now that I've assigned you to that patrol, you *will* be sure." She rose to her paws, tail-tip twitching. "Swiftflight, what's going on?"

I tried to play dumb, but I knew I'd probably fail. "What do you mean?"

Her eyes softened for a heartbeat, a warm purr slipping from her throat to assure me she wasn't about to rake her claws across my muzzle. "We're not blind, Swiftflight. Thornclaw and I both watched Goldenshine storm into camp looking angry, and after she told you something, *you* looked angry. And now, suddenly, you want to bolt out of camp." Her then gaze grew firmer. "What's going on?"

I sighed and closed my eyes, suddenly feeling a wave of guilt. "Goldenshine went to the Moonpool last night," I began to explain. "And just a little while ago, on her way back, she ran into Breezepelt."

Thornclaw surged to his paws, his eyes flashing with indignation.

"*What?*" he nearly hissed. "Was he looking for her out there?"

I let out an exasperated sigh. "I don't know, but I wouldn't put it past him. He tried to talk to her, wouldn't let her leave, and he even tried to use me to guilt her." My voice grew harsher, my temper threatening to grow all over again.

I then shook my head quickly and forced myself to meet their eyes. "I told him to leave her alone when he first started this nonsense, and he didn't listen."

"That little piece of crowfood!" Thornclaw growled.

"I know," I breathed. "I just want to stop by WindClan and tell him to back off."

I then gave a helpless shrug. "I don't know what else to do, but I hate that he came after Goldenshine like that."

Lilypetal exchanged a worried glance with Thornclaw. "Swiftflight..." She sighed, clearly weighing her words. "I hate that just as much as you do, but... are you going to-"

"I promise you that I won't lay a claw on him," I cut her off, knowing exactly where her thoughts were headed. "That's not the plan."

Her eyes flickered with a flash of worry still. "Sure, that's not the *plan*..."

I bristled, forcing calm into my tone. "I'm short-tempered, but I don't hurt others when they rub me the wrong way. Not anymore." I looked between her and Thornclaw, taking a deep breath. "Please. You and Bramblestar wanted to check in with WindClan and see how they're doing with the floods, right? And make sure they're keeping the same border markers? I'll take care of that while I'm there."

Lilypetal's eyes closed, and she sighed again. "Swiftflight..."

"I know, I get it," I pushed on. "But don't we all want Breezepelt to leave Goldenshine alone?"

"I definitely do," Thornclaw meowed, his voice rougher with anger. His eyes slid toward Lilypetal. "If you don't let Swiftflight go, I'll go in his place."

"Thornclaw," Lilypetal said sharply, her eyes still shut tight. "If I sent you, I can be certain that you *would* lay a claw on him."

"I can do it," I cut in quickly. "And anyway, Breezepelt... Breezepelt might listen if he hears it from me."

Thornclaw narrowed his eyes. "He didn't listen to you the first time, did he?"

I hesitated for a moment. "I guess not, but..." I then trailed off, my mind not being able to help flashing back to the night of the Great Battle, one of the first times I'd confronted Breezepelt and had attempted to get through to him. *And I hate that there's a part of me that still hopes that I did something then...* "...It's worth a try." I then said out loud.

I then fixed my gaze on the ThunderClan deputy once again. "Lilypetal, please."

I then watched, my tail lashing with impatience as the brown and white tabby she-cat let out a sigh, finally opening her eyes again. "I am trying to decide whether I want to be in deputy mode..." She then glanced warily over at Thornclaw. "...Or in kin mode."

I then was filled with hope as Lilypetal seemed to think for a few more moments before finally letting out a huff, her gaze firm, but still full of worry. "Fine, Swiftflight. Go. And check in on their borders and with Onestar so I feel better about this."

She tilted her head, an idea seeming to flash in her eyes. "Actually, do you want me to come with you? This might be easier to pull off if someone else is with you."

I was then surprised to see Thornclaw immediately shake his head, his pale blue eyes rolling. "No, Lilypetal."

Her eyes widened, looking back at her mate as if he'd said the most offensive thing in the world. "*No?*"

"You didn't sleep well last night, and you got up extra early to set up today's patrols," Thornclaw insisted, his voice sharp. "You should rest."

I continued to be surprised. *Lilypetal didn't sleep well either?* I thought. *Is she still having her dreams too?* "I agree," I then meowed, nodding to my golden brown tabby kin.

I then looked back at Lilypetal. "Thank you, but I can do this on my own. And anyway, I'm not sure what Breezepelt would think if the ThunderClan deputy accompanied me..." I then snorted. "...and Goldenshine's mother, no less."

Lilypetal narrowed her eyes at us both before finally sighing, defeated. "Fine." Her gaze softened, falling on me with genuine concern. "Be careful, Swiftflight. Be back at sunhigh. Don't make this something I have to explain to Bramblestar later."

I gave my kin a nod. "I promise." I stepped forward, touching my nose to her ear in gratitude. "Thank you." I dipped my head to Thornclaw as well. "Both of you. I'll be back soon."

I then backing away. "Don't tell Goldenshine where I am - she'll worry too much."

Then, without another word, I flashed the two older cats a reassuring glance before turning around and determinedly padding towards the camp entrance.

And as I traveled, I could just barely hear Lilypetal and Thornclaw meowing behind me.

"Lilypetal, you were seriously going to go with Swiftflight after the night you had?" the tom pressed.

"It was just another bad dream, Thornclaw," Lilypetal then replied. Her tone was calm, but there was a twinge of annoyance. "You know I've been having them for days now."

"That doesn't make me feel any better about it!" Thornclaw's frustration was clear in every word. "You don't give yourself any time to recover."

"I recover by helping my family and my Clanmates," Lilypetal said firmly. Then I heard the sound of her pawsteps shifting, moving away from him. "Speaking of... I need to help Brackenfur and Dustpelt rebuild the elder's den - it collapsed this morning on poor Purdy."

A sigh followed, low and tired. "And you'll rest later? Maybe tell me about your dream?" Thornclaw asked.

"Sure, sure," Lilypetal answered, dismissive, her voice already fading as she padded away.

I couldn't help but narrow my eyes, forcing myself to look forward again after having peered back at the two older cats. *Wow, it seems like Lilypetal's dreams are tormenting her just as much as mine are tormenting me... at least according to Thornclaw*, I thought to myself. *Maybe I should have let her come along? I could have told her about the dreams I've had and I could hear about hers... see if they're* anything *like mine.*

I then let out a quiet sniff. *Even if they aren't, I could use some support from someone who has come face to face with Ashfur as much as I have.*

But I then gave a quick dismissive shake of my head. *But I digress... now is not the time.* I told myself as I made it to the tunnel entrance. *And I really do hope that Lilypetal gets some rest. For the both of us, I guess.*

I then paused just as I was about to leave, taking a quick glance towards the clearing behind me.

Thank StarClan, Goldenshine was nowhere to be found, and was probably still in the medicine den. *Thank StarClan.*

I then left camp, beginning to pad up into the daylight and out of the darkness of the tunnels. I found myself trying to push down my apprehension. *I need to do this for her*, I then told myself. *And maybe, StarClan willing, this will be what Breezepelt needs to hear so that he stays away from the both of us... for good.*

I then had to take a deep breath. *Just... just how it should be.*

Chapter 19

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

For a moment, I found that I couldn't move as I stood at the border between WindClan and ThunderClan.

The new one that was now *beyond* the stream, mind you.

I stood there, waiting for a patrol. And thankfully, I couldn't smell any fresh scent markers and could assume that a border patrol would hopefully be coming around soon.

So, there I was, alone with my thoughts. Weirdly, this was something that I did not mind. *But it sure took a while to get to that point...* I thought bitterly, scratching my ear with one of my back paws. *For a while, I didn't even have my own thoughts.*

I then let out a huff, my eyes narrowing. *Would Ashfur have approved me doing something like this? Acting on my anger and confronting someone from another Clan?*

My eyes then blinked with worry. *What if he would? Is this too rash?* I then asked myself anxiously. *What if I come around and realize that this was impulsive?*

I gave myself a few heartbeats before letting out another huff. *Nothing yet,* I then thought. *And maybe that's bad. What if this is harsh and I haven't realized it yet?*

I then gave a shake of my head. *No. Breezepelt was coming after Goldenshine, and I have to protect her,* I told myself. *That isn't rash.*

I then let out a satisfied sniff. *Ashfur wouldn't approve of that at all,* I then realized. *Fantastic.*

Though going to WindClan wasn't ideal, or seeing Breezepelt, of course. But hopefully after this... he would never speak to

Goldenshine again.

And... maybe me.

This cause my heart to feel heavy, but I tried to ignore it. *Stop it, Swiftflight*, I then told myself. *It's how it should be.*

I then closed my eyes and gave a small nod. *It's definitely how Goldenshine would want it.*

I then opened my eyes, taking a deep breath as what I knew to be fresh WindClan scent flooded through my nose. *And that's how I want it too.*

I then stood up, trying to appear as calm and dignified as possible as I then could see the stirring of four pelts up ahead. And all of their pelts were already bristling as they fully came into my view – Nightcloud, Hootpaw, Featherpaw, and Crowfeather were making their way over.

Crowfeather was taking the lead, and meeting the older tom's blue eyes made a chill run down my spine, to be honest.

I hadn't thought about it much, but whenever it did, it hit me like a monster – Crowfeather was my kin too. *And in some ways... I feel like I look more like him than Breezepelt.*

And it still blew my mind that I had come into existence all because Breezepelt had done something pretty much identical to what his father did – falling in love with someone from another Clan. *Glad I broke that cycle...*

I then let out a snort as the patrol came closer. *However, I'd hardly say that Breezepelt demonstrated anything similar to love towards Goldenshine after I was born...* I then thought. *Crowfeather definitely seems to hold some feelings towards Leafpool, from what I've observed.*

I then stood up even straighter as the four cats finally paused in front of me. Crowfeather's blue eyes were narrowed, his demeanor just as closed-off as it had ever been. "Taken a liking to WindClan, have you?" he asked coldly.

My ears flicked, and I felt my fur begin to bristle with defensiveness. "Why would you say that?" I shot back.

The older WindClan tom gave a roll of his eyes. "Keep your fur on. I remember you and your friend coming to WindClan before the stoats."

Nightcloud stepped forward, tail twitching. "That's right," she then meowed, looking at me up and down, causing me to take a step back. "Bramblestar sent *you* again?"

I shrugged, trying to stand up straight. "I guess I've been recruited as the WindClan ambassador." I hoped I sounded genuine as I then gave a nod behind me. "Bramblestar sent me to speak with Onestar and check in with you — to see how you're all doing with the flood."

Nightcloud let out a snort. "'Check in' is one of ThunderClan's favorite terms," Nightcloud then muttered.

I shot her a hard stare. "Don't act like you didn't lead the patrol that poked your noses into our camp a quarter moon ago." I then shrugged. "We're just returning the favor, I suppose."

"With a single cat?" Crowfeather demanded. "Why didn't Bramblestar send a patrol?"

I narrowed my eyes back at him. "Unlike you all, he didn't want to intimidate you by sending an entire group of cats," I replied smugly. "He figured just sending one would do the trick."

Before Crowfeather could respond, Hootpaw shoved his way between him and Nightcloud. "That's suspicious! This is an ambush, isn't it?"

Crowfeather rolled his eyes. "Hootpaw..."

"No, this is not an ambush," I said firmly, giving a lash of my tail. "I'd let you all explore the entire ThunderClan forest to prove that it isn't one."

"Ambush or not," Crowfeather then muttered, flashing Hootpaw a

warning look, "there's no need for us to take you to our camp. Tell Bramblestar we're doing fine. You can go now."

I swallowed, hoping my rising frustration – and slightest desperation - wasn't showing. "I was sent to speak with Onestar, and I don't want to return to my camp until I do what I was told."

Crowfeather snorted, tail lashing. "Then you'll be waiting until the next season. Onestar doesn't have time to deal with every ThunderClan cat who wants to play messenger."

"I said I was sent to speak with him," I snapped. "You think I'd come all this way for a stroll?"

Crowfeather took a step closer, eyes narrowing and darkening. "Watch your tone. You're on WindClan territory, and you're lucky I haven't already sent you running back to Bramblestar with your tail between your legs."

I couldn't help the smirk that crept across my muzzle. "Are you sure I'd be the one running if you tried that?"

Featherpaw shifted uneasily beside the dark gray WindClan tom. "Crowfeather—maybe Onestar wouldn't mind him stopping by?"

"Hush, Featherpaw," Crowfeather snapped without even looking at her.

A low growl rumbled in my chest. "Hm. Typical WindClan hospitality."

Crowfeather's ears flattened and his voice rose. "Typical ThunderClan arrogance! Acting like you're doing us a favor by 'checking in.'"

Nightcloud finally stepped between us, her tail flicking sharply. "Great StarClan, that's enough! You two argue like kin who've shared the same nest their whole lives."

"Don't be ridiculous," Crowfeather hissed.

Nightcloud only cocked an eyebrow, her voice dry. "Am I wrong?

Maybe you've got another secret kit hiding in ThunderClan."

I froze, and I hoped no one noticed. Crowfeather glared sharply. "Don't start."

I turned my head quickly, forcing down my surprise and trying to sound dismissive. "That's funny," I meowed nonchalantly. "I think I'd remember if I had WindClan blood."

"I guess you weren't lucky enough," Crowfeather muttered, and I had to keep myself from shifting uncomfortably. Then he shot me a hard, assessing look. "Anyway - you want to see Onestar? Fine. But don't expect me to smooth things over for you."

I snorted, though even I could hear the tension beneath it. "You don't need to. I can handle myself." I took a deep breath and gave him a sincere look. "But thank you."

Crowfeather rolled his eyes and began to turn away. "Don't start warming up now."

As we started walking, I heard Nightcloud mutter under her breath, "StarClan help us, two of them in one Clan would be the end of the forest."

Crowfeather and Featherpaw led the way while Nightcloud and Hootpaw took up the rear behind me.

And once again, I hoped they weren't picking up my emotions as I was astounded – I couldn't believe that I was pulling this off. So far...

We walked in silence the entire way to camp, and just after we all had crawled through the entrance, everyone seemed to pause and stare at me, as if they were looking at a slightly rooted fresh-kill that they weren't sure whether to throw out or risk eating.

Eventually, Crowfeather let out a huff. "I'll take care of him. You all go ahead and report to Harespring."

Nightcloud narrowed her eyes at her Clanmate. "Are you sure? I'm worried that I might come back to a pile of dark gray fur."

"From which cat?" Hootpaw cut in.

Crowfeather let out a hiss and flicked his tail dismissively. "Don't worry about it," he muttered as he turned around, appearing to be heading towards Onestar's den. "I'll bite my sharp tongue and hope that Swiftflight bites his too."

He then paused in his pawsteps, glancing over his shoulder back at me, his eyes narrowed. "I'm just going to tell Onestar that he's here."

Then, without another word, Nightcloud, Hootpaw, and Featherpaw padded away, and Crowfeather began to make his way towards the leader's den after flashing me one last warning look.

I was honestly surprised that the older WindClan tom had left me by myself in the middle of their camp.

I mean, I didn't want to have an inflated sense of myself – those moons had passed – but I couldn't help but wonder if Crowfeather trusted me a little more than he had let on. *Maybe he feels seen talking with someone that matches his level of snappy...*

I then narrowed my eyes. *You'd think he'd get that with Breezepelt being his son...* I then realized before tilting my head. *But are they even close at all right now? It certainly didn't seem like it the last time I saw them together...*

I then felt a small chill run down my spine. That had been at the Dark Forest battle, when Crowfeather had ripped Breezepelt away from Lionblaze, Breezepelt's half-brother.

I then began to shake my head. *He tried to kill his half-brother... among everything else*, I then thought. *How do you get past that? I can't imagine that Crowfeather would get over that quickly.*

I then let out a sniff. *I wouldn't. And... I'm not.*

My eyes then narrowed deeper as I began to scan them around the WindClan camp, wondering if I would spot a certain black pelt before Onestar even got to me. *I... I won't.*

But before I'd barely begun my search, I saw gray black fur out of

the corner of my eye and turned to see Crowfeather leading the tabby pelt of Onestar with him.

And as I had expected, the WindClan leader did not look pleased to see me here. I'm sure he would have looked full of contempt at anyone here that was outside of his Clan, but I had observed that there was something about ThunderClan that made him appear to wince even more.

And I wasn't sure if me having been here before would help me or hurt me in this situation. "So, someone from ThunderClan decided to quit hiding underground and see what's going on in the outside world?" The leader's voice seemed to boom through the camp.

I gave a bitter lash of my tail. "Would you rather us have stayed in the stone hollow and be swimming every moment of the day?"

Onestar barely blinked. "I'd be fine with whatever you do as long as you stay away from here." I couldn't help rolling my eyes at that. "Crowfeather said that you were persistent on coming here."

"Just doing as my leader and deputy instructed," I replied, trying to keep my fur lying flat.

He rolled his eyes right back at me. "Meddling mouse-brains."

"Careful saying that about the Clan that helped you fight off those stoats," I shot back, tail flicking.

"And you continue to prove my point," he muttered. "Whatever. I suppose I can respect you respecting your leaders. Tell Bramblestar and Lilypetal that we're doing fine. The water has gone down a bit and we've managed to catch a few kills. Satisfied?"

"Absolutely," I meowed clearly.

"Great. Now get out and don't come back this time."

"I second that," Crowfeather added, stepping closer. I shot him a deadpan look, which he ignored. "Do I need to escort him, Onestar?"

Onestar narrowed his eyes, his gaze burning into me. "Hm..."

Before he could answer, I cut in quickly, "I doubt he wants to spend another moment with me. And anyway"—I turned to Crowfeather—"do you really want to trudge through your muddy territory again?"

"I'd do it to ensure you don't cause trouble," he replied stiffly.

"You're bold to assume I'd trust a ThunderClan cat to just stroll out of my camp," Onestar then hissed, his tail tip flicking in warning.

"I didn't come here to cause trouble, Onestar," I insisted. "I came to check on WindClan, not to start another border skirmish."

He stared at me for a long heartbeat before letting out another sigh. "Fine. If you're so eager to leave, go. But if I catch even a whisker of you near our camp again, I won't be as generous."

"Understood." I dipped my head slightly, forcing myself to stay respectful. "Thank you both."

And with that, I turned to leave, already eager to put as much distance as possible between myself and WindClan's prickly leader.

But then I slowly came to a stop, realizing that I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to do next.

I hadn't caught sight of Breezepelt yet, and I knew that I couldn't just *wander* around WindClan camp.

I once again had to try hard to keep my fur flat. It had only been a few moments since I'd been free, but already wondered if I was going to have to give up – I'd already spoken to Onestar, and I had no reason to stay in the WindClan camp.

I... I have to leave, then.

And as I made my way towards the camp entrance, trying to push down my frustration, I could feel eyes on my, as if I had already been lingering for too long. Darn it. There's no way that I can pull this off anymore, I conceded. At least I actually have a message

from Onestar to bring back to Bramblestar and Lilypetal. When it comes to Breezepelt, I'll just have to-

Everything around me then became black as my head rammed *straight* into the pelt of another cat. I couldn't help but let out a startled hiss as I gave a quick shake of my head to bring my sight back into focus.

And my heart nearly dropped once it had.

There was Breezepelt – clearly the cat that I had just run into – with Heathertail behind him and prey in both of their mouths.

I immediately could tell that the WindClan tom could hardly believe what he was seeing.

Well, and neither could I. And Great StarClan, looking at him made my anger flare up all over again.

But at the same time, I almost felt like this was a StarClan-granted moment, *but then again, I would hope that StarClan didn't grant me being in this whole situation and having me have to tell off Breezepelt in the first place!*

I gave another quick shake of my head, knowing I had to act fast, even faster than before. So, I put my muzzle close to the WindClan tom's ear. "Meet me outside of camp," I whispered to him before brushing past him and Heathertail.

Even though I couldn't see him, I could practically feel the older tom's urgency, and he seemed to shift behind me. "Uh... I'm not sure if this was enough prey for us to bring back to camp," I heard him meow to the she-cat. "You rest – I'll go and get a couple more catches."

I then heard his pawsteps from a bit behind me. "And while I'm at it," he then said, "I'll make sure that this ThunderClan cat leaves our territory properly."

Oh, don't worry, I'll be out of your fur as soon as I possibly can...

Breezepelt wasn't far behind me, so I decided to stop by a clearing

next to a couple of trees, and the wind of the moors chilled my fur just as much as my back was already chilling as I waited.

I then flicked my ears, my fur beginning to bristle slightly as I then heard what I assumed to be Breezepelt's quick pawsteps. Sure enough, I turned to see my father approaching.

And as I watched him arrive, my blood seemed to run cold, and seeing the slight glint of hope in the black tom's eyes only made me angrier. *Why does he think I'd ever be here for a good reason?* I asked myself. *Is he really hoping I'll forgive him? That... I have a reason to?*

I then flicked my ears. *Do I?*

I then shook my head, bringing myself to look at Breezepelt's hopeful gaze just so I'd grow angry again. *Shut up.*

And as Breezepelt came to a stop, I didn't bother hiding that anger in my voice. "I wouldn't look so excited, Breezepelt. I'm not happy that I'm here right now. At all."

At my words, the tom let out a deep sigh and even closed his eyes for a moment — and for a heartbeat, I wondered if he was disappointed. "Then why are you here?" he asked quietly.

I didn't back down. "Don't play dumb," I snapped. "You think Goldenshine *wouldn't* tell me about that idiotic move you pulled on her way from the Moonpool?" Breezepelt let out a huff, confirming exactly what I already knew. "Yeah. I'm surprised you thought you'd get away with that from either of us. I *told* you to stay away from her — why didn't you listen?"

"Swiftflight, I promise you that I did *not* hunt her down," Breezepelt immediately insisted. "I was out here by myself that night, hunting and gathering my thoughts..." He then looked away from me for a moment and shook his head. "I caught her scent and I... I wasn't thinking."

"No kidding," I muttered tautly.

"I followed it, and there she was," he went on. "I thought that while I was there, I could try talking to her." He sniffed, shrugging

helplessly. "It didn't work."

"*No kidding!*" My fur began to bristle even more. "I told you to stay away from her because she *doesn't want to talk to you*." I then let my claws sink into the earth. "And in case you've forgotten, you've also been a danger to her *life* in the past."

"Swiftflight..." he breathed, pained.

I swallowed hard, my chest tightening. "I... I don't care that you were her mate," I then trailed off for just a moment, having no idea why it was suddenly becoming more difficult to speak. "I... I don't care that you're my father. Goldenshine is more important to me than almost anyone else on earth. You are a threat to her, and I need you to stay away."

Breezepelt looked genuinely hurt. Then he hesitated, eyes flicking over me with a strange, almost eager glimmer that made my stomach twist. "Swiftflight... were you not a threat to those in your Clan at one point in your life?"

For a moment, my ears could hardly the process the words the tom had meowed. "*What?*"

"You..." He hesitated again. "You don't think I remember our talk during the Dark Forest battle?"

My eyes widened. *He... he mentioned...*

"It may not have seemed like it, but I heard what you said," Breezepelt went on, taking a step closer to me. "You acknowledged that you were once like me. I mean — I *know* that you were. I was drowning in my own anger and need for vengeance every night in the Dark Forest, but I saw you there. You looked just as captivated by those evil cats as I did at one point. And Goldenshine..."

I then narrowed my eyes once again at the mention of my mother's name. Breezepelt took a deep breath. "I don't know if she ever told you this, but Goldenshine talked to me about you and how worried she was at one point." He shrugged, and his gaze darkened. "She didn't know I was training there too, and I sent her away out of

shame..."

He then gave a quick shake of his head. "But the point is — I think she was worried you were going down a dark path... the same one I fully followed through with."

"Exactly," I said sharply, though every word Breezepelt had just spoken was spiraling in my head already as I took a step closer to him. "The one you *followed through* with, Breezepelt."

I then began to shake my head slowly, "Like I told you during the battle, I pulled myself out of that awful place before it was too late," I then went on coldly. "I can't be sure if you have. I mean, you fought with the Dark Forest that night."

"I did," he admitted, bowing his head. "And I can't justify that. I'm not even going to try. But Swiftflight..." He then looked back up at me, that sickening hopeful look in his amber eyes once again. "...while it's coming later, who's to say I can't try to redeem myself just like you did?"

"I... redeem yourself?" I then trailed off. I had to admit – I was stricken by Breezepelt's words. "I don't know..." I then whispered.

"I imagine that was tough for you, wasn't it?" he then pressed.

I let out a soft sigh. "It... it was. I'll admit that."

"I'm sure it took you moons to gain everyone's trust," he then said gently. "That's what I'm willing to put in. And that means I'm going to take a chance while I have it."

"But..." I then took another deep breath. I could hardly believe I was now speaking as calmly as I was. "I *told you* not to talk to her, Breezepelt."

"I may be trying to fix my reputation," Breezepelt then meowed clearly, "but I'm not claiming to be perfect."

I could only stare back at the WindClan tom for a moment. He was right – *we were both going down the exact same path at one point.* "And neither was I," I then muttered replying to the tom. "Neither *am* I. I

definitely made choices that haunt me — that will haunt me for the rest of my life — but..."

I then took a deep breath and shut my eyes. *We aren't the same. I wanted to believe we were, and he wants me to think that, but I can't...* "Breezepelt, I can be *certain* that you were *mere heartbeats* from taking the lives of Lionblaze, Dustystorm, and even Goldenshine, for StarClan's sake!" I then meowed, my voice tightening quickly. "I was about to bowl you over and rip you to shreds to stop you, but Dustystorm beat me to it."

Almost to my satisfaction, anger surged through me again. "No matter how much time I could give you, that would take me a long, *long* time to get over."

I then let out a snort. "And imagine how Goldenshine feels! The fact that you thought you could talk to her and have it be civil is *laughable!*"

I could almost feel Breezepelt's own frustration. "Swiftflight..." he then tried to cut in.

"No." My tail lashed, and my voice dropped to a cold hiss as I tried to bring my head back down to earth. "For all I know, everything you're telling me is just an act. That's how you've gotten your way with others in the past." I flicked my tail sharply. "Sure, maybe you're telling the truth, but I've seen nothing that makes me sure — especially when you don't respect Goldenshine's wishes or mine"

I then took a step closer to the tom, my fur bristling now. "I came here to tell you that you didn't, and that I want you to stay away." I hesitated before forcing out the next part. "*For good.*"

Breezepelt sighed, his gaze heavy. "Swiftflight, please..."

"I'm leaving now," I then muttered, turning away. "And if I ever see you again, it'll be too soon."

He was silent for a long moment. Then quietly, from behind me, he asked, "That's really what you want?"

I abruptly stopped in my tracks, whipping my head around. "Are

you insinuating that it's not?"

"You may claim that you want nothing to do with me," he murmured, his amber eyes looking deep into mine despite his distance from me, "but you are still my son. I can see through you, and I can't help but wonder..."

My blood ran cold as I fully turned back around. "How *dare* you say that? I can't help but wonder if you're just trying to get into my head again! And I'm getting out of here before you continue to do so." I began turning around again, muscles tense.

"That's fine, Swiftflight," he said softly. "But wait a moment, please."

I paused, but didn't face him fully.

"Listen," he said, voice still quiet. "I... I will respect what you're telling me to do. I really will." I finally turned my head slightly, and he went on. "I will respect what you're telling me... if it means it brings me one step closer to redemption."

And after those words, the silence in the forest was almost deafening as the WindClan tom's words processed.

I stared at him for a moment, searching his face. Something was in his gaze — something almost painfully genuine.

I suddenly had so much to say, and yet none of it would come.

"...Okay," I forced out at last. Then I turned away again and began walking, using all of my strength to bring my paws forward. "Bye, Breezepelt."

"Bye, Swiftflight," he called after me. "Try to get some rest, will you?"

I froze, snapping my head over my shoulder once again. "Rest?"

"You look... tired," he said quietly, now staring thoughtfully back at me.

"I'm fine," I muttered.

"Okay..." He sighed and turned away. "Go on. Get back safely."

I then simply grunted, quickly walking away and not looking back again. I stared straight forward as I made my way to ThunderClan territory, my adrenaline and my WindClan paws bringing me to be able to leap over the stream.

And once I was sure that Breezepelt was away and fully out of sight, I came to a stop, looked around to check that I was alone...

And then, I let out a shaky sigh and lowered my head.

To be honest, I hadn't been this overwhelmed with emotion for a very, very long time. And I had no idea what to do about it.

For all I knew, everything that Breezepelt had just said were more of his lies – everything he had said... everything that I would *want* to hear, could have more of his sick manipulation. But at the same time, something couldn't escape me. *He...*

I began to shake my head in amazement. *He did hear what I said at the Dark Forest battle...* I then thought. *He could be listening and... be trying to redeem himself because of what I said?*

I then screwed my eyes shut. *That is what he'd want me to believe...*

I then let out another sigh, not being able to help slashing at a bramble bush before slowly continuing my travel back to the tunnels. *I... I just don't know.*

~>~>~>~>~>~

I practically burst into the tunnels, trying to catch my breath as I immediately headed straight for the brown tabby and white pelt of Lilypetal, who luckily had quickly caught my gaze as I'd come in.

It had only taken me a few more moments after entering ThunderClan territory to realize that sunhigh was approaching, and that if I let myself stay in my head for much longer, I was going to be late for the patrol that Lilypetal had assigned me to that morning.

The rest of my return had been a *run*, and the sun appeared to be high in the sky just before I'd made my way underground.

But thank StarClan, rather than looking impatient or angry, Lilypetal's hazel eyes only flashed with relief as I scrambled up to meet her. "Lilypetal, I'm so sorry," I meowed urgently to my kin. "Am I late for that patrol?"

Lilypetal shook her head immediately. "You're back with plenty of time, Swiftflight. The others haven't even begun to gather yet." She stepped closer, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Is everything okay? Are *you* okay?"

I nodded, trying to look steadier than I felt. "Yes. I said what I needed to say and... I didn't rip his fur off." My kin let out a soft purr. "He claimed he was going to listen, and right now I can only cling to the hope that he will." *Cling being the operative word here...*

"Good." She meowed before then bringing her voice down to a whisper again. "I didn't want to feed into Thornclaw's anger earlier... but I also would have *loved* to give that WindClan tom a piece of my mind if I was able to."

After I then let out a purr, the deputy gave me a light nudge. "I'm glad you're back safe."

"Thank you," I meowed, flashing Lilypetal a grateful look. "I'm just glad I got back on time! I was getting worried."

"Back on time?"

My heart dropped straight into my paws. Lilypetal and I exchanged a worried glance before we both slowly turned around to see the golden brown tabby pelt of Goldenshine approaching us, her dark gray eyes narrowed. "You were just going for a walk, weren't you?" she asked, voice low and suspicious. "Why were you worried about getting back on time?"

Shoot.

Beside me, Lilypetal stepped forward without hesitation. "Oh, he checked in with me before he left and told me he was going to try

and take a walk all the way to the Twoleg half-bridge. Remember when Thornclaw and I took you and Snowflight down there when you were apprentices? It's a bit of a trip."

I stared at her, amazed. Lilypetal had come up with a brilliant lie. But I felt my stomach twist with guilt as I lightly nodded with agreement. And I already was beginning to feel even worse as I watched my mother simply narrow my eyes at me, her nostrils slightly twitching as she seemed to be sniffing. "Why do you smell so much like lavender?"

I tried to keep my eyes from widening with alarm. "I... well, I'm still trying to impress Cherryfall, I guess," I blurted out quickly, giving a sheepish shrug. "It took me so long to get her, I want to do everything I can to make sure I'm appealing to her."

"Oh my goodness gracious..." I could hear Lilypetal mutter under her breath.

Goldenshine's eyes managed to narrow even more. "Mhm. Come with me." She turned sharply, then shot Lilypetal a warning look. "And I'll deal with you covering for him later."

Lilypetal flicked her tail towards her daughter. "I am your mother, you will deal with *nothing*." She then watched Goldenshine walk a few paces away before leaning toward my ear. "For someone who once was taught to be so conniving, you seem to struggle with lying on the spot."

"It's not a complete lie!" I protested.

She sighed. "Okay." She touched her nose to my cheek. "Good luck over there."

"Thanks," I murmured. I took a deep breath, letting her scent settle my nerves, then forced myself to follow Goldenshine down the tunnel. She stopped in a quiet corner and let out a huff, then turned to face me, her stance tight and guarded.

"Alright," she then said sharply. "Where were you?"

My heart pounded so hard that it hurt. I hated lying to her. Thank

StarClan I'd gotten to that point as a cat and a son. But in a way, I was almost going to have to channel how I used to be if I was going to get away with this. "I was taking a walk, like I said," I finally answered.

Goldenshine let out a sniff, standing up and beginning to pace. "I guess that's not a lie. You took a walk, alright," she then muttered. "You took a walk straight to WindClan, did StarClan knows what there, and then you rolled in some lavender so I wouldn't find out."

Well shoot. She'd clocked me.

"You're stealthy enough for any other cat," she said, stopping to face me directly, "but not for your mother, Swiftflight. You went to WindClan and spoke to Breezepelt, didn't you?"

I had hoped she wouldn't be *so* on the nose, but she was Goldenshine. And I already couldn't stand lying to her any longer. "I did..." Her eyes filled instantly with anger and betrayal, and I rushed to add, "but Goldenshine, I did it because I wanted to protect you! He wasn't listening to you, so I wanted to try and talk to him. I can't stand him trying to go after you."

She sighed deeply and closed her eyes for a moment, gathering herself. "And Swiftflight... I appreciate you trying to do that for me, I really do. But..." she then let out an exasperated huff. "Do you not realize how much it clearly stuck with Breezepelt that you spoke to him at all the first time? Going back to see him, no matter the intent, is only going to make him think he *has a chance*."

I flicked my ears back at the she-cat. "What? Even if that may be true, you're missing the point!" I insisted. "I told him to stay away from you for good, and he... he said he was going to respect it."

"And you believe him?"

I gave a shrug – *maybe Goldenshine will if I try to tell her what he said...* "Well, I mean, I don't know..." I admitted. "He said he's willing to do anything if it brings him closer to redemption."

Goldenshine snorted. "Redemption. What a word to come out of his

mouth."

"I know, it's crazy — but I hope he listened this time," I meowed confidently, having to somewhat ignore my disappointment at my mother's response. "He didn't get angry. And... I mean..."

I then shifted uncomfortably in my spot. "I mean, I don't care if he keeps bothering me if he stays away from you."

"Swiftflight, I'm not even sure if I'm okay with that," she said bluntly.

"What?" I asked, taken aback.

"Well, I'd hate for him to think he's getting anything from our family. He's already gotten way more than he deserves." She took a breath. "Again, I appreciate what you were trying to do, Swiftflight. But I think that the both of us just need to stay as far away as possible."

My eyes widened. Alarm surged through me. "The both of us? Have you decided for the both of us?"

"Yes, I have," she said firmly. "I just can't risk Breezepelt thinking that he has a chance." Then her ears flicked as something occurred to her. "What's the problem with that? Were you going to do something else?"

I felt my heart drop. "No! N-no..." I stammered. "I mean, I went to WindClan to tell him off, didn't I?"

She looked me up and down, scrutinizing every last whisker. "...I suppose you did."

"Yes. I-I did." I took a deep breath, overwhelmed by absolutely everything I was feeling.

And suddenly, I felt like I needed to be away with my thoughts again. "Well, I'm sure my patrol is leaving soon, so I'd better go."

Goldenshine didn't answer immediately, clearly noting my abrupt exit. "Alright. I'll see you later then." Her voice softened, and so did

her gaze. . "I love you."

I sagged slightly. "I love you too." Then I turned and walked away, feeling her eyes burning into my back with every pawstep.

But I didn't look back. I was already too stuck in my thoughts to even think about doing that. *Goldenshine loves me...* I told myself before letting out a snort. *Well, of course she does. But it's because she does that she is making this call for us. She... she wouldn't make this decision if she didn't think it was best for me, right?*

I then began to shake my head slowly as I made my way across our makeshift camp. *What made me think I could try to convince her that Breezepelt was being serious? When I'm not even sure if he was being serious? Maybe I just hoped...*

But I quickly tried to push that hope away. *I'll only be disappointed*, I then tried to tell myself. *It's too risky, and I should listen to Goldenshine. As...*

I then paused, trying to collect myself and take a deep breath before joining the patrol that was now waiting by the tunnel entrance. *As much as I almost wish that I could talk to him again.*

Chapter 20

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

"Lilypetal?"

I thought I could just barely hear my name being called, breaking through the fog that seemed to be dragging me down beneath the cave floors.

"Lilypetal? Are you okay?"

I finally forced myself to snap out of it, yanking myself away from all of the bone-chilling images I was seeing in my head and shifting my gaze back to my apprentice's worried blue eyes. "I'm here, Lilypaw. I'm sorry."

The younger she-cat let out a sigh of relief. "Great *StarClan*, I wasn't sure if you were ever going to come to! Are you alright?"

I sighed with exasperation, heat creeping into my ears. "Ugh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." I then gave a quick shake of my head. "Yes! I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." *No.* "I promise." I then forced myself to take a deep breath. "Just got lost in my own thoughts there for a moment."

Lilypaw's eyes immediately glowed with sympathy. "That's been happening a lot lately, hasn't it?" she asked gently.

Too much. "Definitely more often lately," I admitted. "I'm sorry again, Lilypaw."

"That's okay! Really." Her ears then perked a little. "Remember that one time I dove straight into that birch tree? I was so deep in thought that when you told me to pounce forward and I snapped

out of it, I didn't even look where I was going!"

A small purr managed to escape me despite everything. "Goodness gracious, you had me purring until my stomach hurt with that one." We shared a brief, quiet purr together before I let out a sigh. "Thank you, sweetheart."

I then hesitated, thinking for a moment, then releasing a shaky breath. "And... I guess I'm still down after yesterday..."

My apprentice's eyes immediately darkened with sadness as she lowered her head. "Yeah..." She looked back up at me with helpless, aching eyes. "Where did those badgers even come from, Lilypetal? Why did they have to invade now of all times?" She shook her head, grief trembling through her voice. "Why did Dustpelt have to die because of them?"

I shut my eyes for a moment — the fact that he'd been killed by those StarClan-cursed badgers hitting like a monster all over again. "I wish I had an answer to that, Lilypaw," I murmured. "StarClan works in mysterious... and sometimes very horrible ways that I'm sure *they* couldn't even explain, but..." I took a steadying breath to compose myself. "Dustpelt died defending his Clan, and now he is reunited with Ferncloud up in StarClan." I sniffed and lifted one shoulder in a helpless shrug. "Dustpelt is probably the least sad out of all of us."

To my relief, Lilypaw managed a tiny, trembling purr. "That's true."

I also let out a small purr, but my heart didn't feel much lighter as I was brought back to yesterday.

I seriously wasn't sure how me or Bramblestar hadn't flat-out collapsed yet with all of the trouble that had been brought upon ThunderClan lately. To add to the excitement of the flooding, Bramblestar discovered signs of a brutal badger attack on ShadowClan and, despite ThunderClan's protests, insisted ThunderClan would help drive the badgers out.

ThunderClan joined ShadowClan in the battle to chase them off, and while they had been able to scare them all away, Dustpelt had

died from his wounds.

While I hadn't been on the patrol that fought off the badgers, I had been ready and waiting to lead a backup patrol that stood just outside of our camp entrance.

We all had initially exchanged looks of excitement when we heard the pawsteps of our Clanmates returning, but absolute tragedy and dismay practically seemed to be *dumped* onto our patrol when we saw Bramblestar and Squirrelflight carrying the body of the tabby senior warrior.

And, of course, we held vigil immediately after that. It was the *least* we could have done for a cat like Dustpelt.

I then took a deep breath, sending a prayer up to StarClan for him and then trying to meet my apprentice with a warmer, encouraging look. "Anyway, where were we?" Something suddenly occurred to me, and I clapped a paw to my forehead. "Shoot, I was going to teach you something, wasn't I?" *And darn me for forgetting, goodness gracious!*

Lilypaw's eyes lit up. "Yeah!" She only had to think for the briefest moment. "I think it was the Back Kick?"

I gave a quick shake of my head and let out a frustrated sigh. "Right," I then muttered, closing my eyes. "Gosh, I'm sorry, Lilypaw."

I opened my eyes to see that Lilypaw genuinely didn't seem phased. "It really is okay, Lilypetal!"

I muttered under my breath, "If you say so..." Then I shook my head again and flicked my tail, signaling for Lilypaw to follow me. "Here, let's head over to this corner where some light leaks in, and I'll demonstrate it."

Her ears perked up and her tail flicked eagerly. "Great!"

As I had expected, I immediately heard Lilypaw's quick and light pawsteps behind me, and thank StarClan she couldn't see my face as I led her across camp, which currently was full of distress.

Yes, of course I hadn't been lying when I mentioned how much Dustpelt's loss was getting to me, but that wasn't all. *It's never that simple...*

I think I'd had the most unsettling, terrifying and horrible nightmare of my *entire life* last night.

More Ashfur horribleness, of course, but out of all the flashbacks that I could receive, I definitely saw the parts that already left a permanent scar in my heart, and it was almost as if he or some entity had created a new fresh wound right where the scars were.

For the first part of it, I remember already being soaked by a torrential downpour as I stood in the middle of the ThunderClan stone hollow. The setting was too specific and all-too familiar, and I hated experiencing what felt like lightning physically striking and splitting my heart in half as two figures walk through the camp entrance.

Goldenshine and Jayfeather, with the body of my precious Snowflight on their back.

"I found her in the forest," I then heard Goldenshine murmur as time skipped just slightly. "Killed by Ashfur."

Time then skipped again, and I was suddenly full of anger as Goldenshine seemed to be blocking me from running out into the forest. "Why won't you let me find him and kill him?" I cried out.

"Because he's already dead," Jayfeather meowed, almost at a whisper.

I then remember being full of helplessness as I was then yanked away from that flashback, and suddenly, I was in the warriors den, my heart seeming to beat in my ears as I stared in horror down at the motionless golden brown tabby pelt that was lying in my nest. "Jayfeather, what is going on? What happened?" I'd asked, my voice shaking so much it was probably hardly comprehensible.

As if my heart couldn't beat any faster, it managed to as I met the worried gaze of Jayfeather's blind eyes. I expected him to snap at

me or to tell me to go away, but all he said was, "I don't know. I don't know at all."

"I woke up early, just as the dawn patrols were going out," Brightheart began, sounding completely distressed. "I was just about to leave the den when I saw Thornclaw. It was dark, but I could just barely see all of his wounds, and that he was barely moving, so I immediately ran to get Jayfeather."

Thornclaw had practically looked shredded. He was barely moving. Jayfeather looked worried, which I knew meant that this wasn't good in the slightest.

If he's not dead yet, he's going to be, I thought as I let out a wail of grief out loud. *The love of my life is going to be gone! This isn't fair!*

I was pulled away from the flashback again, and suddenly, I was standing in front of the lake, feeling like I was furless from how cold it was, and my paws felt frozen.

And as if I was fully there and reliving this moment all over again, my body was aching, weak, and useless as I cried out and stared out at the frozen lake. "Mistpelt, you can do it!" I called out to my mother with all of the remaining strength I had in my voice as I watched her struggle to stay above the ice cold water, my three youngest kits staring down at her in horror. "Just keep doing what you're doing! A patrol will be here at any moment to help you!"

And all I had done was watch and wail out as Mistpelt's head vanished under the water one last time.

"He tried to kill your kits," I then heard echoes of the conversation that me, Thornclaw, Goldenshine and Swiftflight had had out in the forest, when Swiftflight had revealed to me how Mistpelt and my kits ended up at the lake in the first place. "But thanks to Mistpelt, he didn't succeed."

But he did succeed! I then thought to myself, my heart blazing with rage within my dream. *He succeeded several times over. It broke me then, and it's still breaking me now...*

And then my eyes had flown open. As eternal as the nightmare had felt, I could just barely hear the crickets from outside. Hardly any time had passed since I'd fallen asleep.

And after I'd looked right next to me, reassuring myself that the love of my life was alive and still pressed right up against me, I'd tried to fall back asleep to no avail.

So, eventually, I gave up, leaving Thornclaw at our nest and deciding to take over guarding the camp entrance and sending Wrenfeather back to the warriors den.

Soon after that, I was able to get together the dawn patrol, and now I was training Lilypaw. Although it had now been about half a day since I'd been awake, I still felt as if I hadn't fully come down from it.

So, what else could I do but push through the day? I refused to do anything else, and refused to even picture how concerning it would look if I let the nightmare get to me, as absolutely heartbreaking as it had been and how tired it had all left me.

And I was telling myself that I *needed* to focus and wake up if I wanted to appear normal and on top of things to anyone at all as I came to a stop, turning back to Lilypaw and giving an encouraging lash of my tail.

I took a deep breath, almost as if I were trying to inhale enthusiasm and exhale stress, and I tried to bring myself back to the day I learned this move all that time ago. *If I can teach it half as well as you did, Firestar, I'll be proud... and surprised that I had the capability.* "Alright, Lilypaw," I meowed. "Pay attention. And don't blink."

I then gave my apprentice a teasing, hard stare. "Seriously—don't blink."

As expected, Lilypaw looked confused. "Huh?" Lilypaw started.

Before Lilypaw could even respond, I sprung forward, vanishing behind her in a blur of fur. Then, trying not to purr, I lightly took my hind paws and tapped my apprentice's flank, bringing her to

hop forward about a tail-length.

Lilypaw immediately whirled around, her blue eyes wide. "Whoa!" the she-cat exclaimed. "Lilypetal, you could have warned me!"

I sniffed and gave a sharp lash of my tail. "That *was* the warning. Pretty neat, right?"

"Neat?" Lilypaw gasped as she gave an excited hop. "That was incredible! I felt like I got launched by a badger."

I let out a satisfied huff. "Fantastic. Then the move did its job." Mischief flickered through me as I narrowed my eyes and began to demonstrate again - this time much slower, so she could watch every motion. "Your opponent thinks you're backing off. So, they relax. But then—" I simply back-kicked the air, Lilypaw watching with wide eyes. "They're airborne and wondering what the *heck* is going on!"

To my amusement, Lilypaw simply nodded rapidly, drinking in every word. So, I lashed my tail encouragingly at my apprentice. "So," I teased, "want to give it a whirl? Or do you need a moment to recover your dignity?"

Lilypaw pretended to look offended. "Hey! *I always* recover quickly." Then she gave a single excited hop. "*Yes*, let me try!"

"Great! You've got this, Lilypaw." I then had to give my head a violent shake to stay awake, silently thankful I'd managed to stay focused long enough to teach her the move at all. "Is there any part of the move that you need me to-"

"Lilypetal!"

I flicked my ears at the sound of my leader's voice and turned my head to see the dark brown tabby tom quickly padding toward Lilypaw and me, his amber eyes full of determination.

He came to a stop right in front of us. "Lilypetal, I wasn't sure if you and Lilypaw were coming to a stopping point in your training session?"

"Noooo!" Lilypaw protested.

I raised my tail for silence and flashed Lilypaw an amused, but warning look. "Possibly." I then turned back to Bramblestar. "What's going on?"

"I wasn't sure if you were interested in joining a patrol with me, Squirrelflight, and Thornclaw," he explained. "We're going to hunt, but I also thought along the way we could survey how the flood is doing and see what our next game plan is."

Oh, StarClan.

I nodded, though my stomach twisted with nerves and my fatigue seemed to double in that exact moment. "Absolutely!" I tried to meow enthusiastically. "Are we going now?"

"We'll be losing daylight soon, so yes," Bramblestar replied. He then sniffed. "Unless you've developed some StarClan-gifted night vision."

I sighed. "If only," I muttered. "I'll be right there."

Bramblestar nodded gratefully. "Great." He began to pad off. "We'll be waiting by the tunnel entrance!"

...Fabulous.

I watched the leader go for a moment before turning back around. And great *StarClan*, if Lilypaw weren't in front of me, I probably would have let out a huff and let myself sink to the ground for a moment. I thought I was doing a pretty darn good job of hiding it so far, but if it wasn't clear already, today felt as if both my brain and my heart had been run over by a monster.
And me going on a patrol to survey the territory *and* hunt was definitely going to take a toll. *However, it's an opportunity to show that I won't let it all get to me*, I then told myself. *I'll push through, and prove that I am capable.*

I took another deep breath and flashed Lilypaw an apologetic, yet encouraging look. "Sorry that we have to end it here, Lilypaw." I flicked my ears. "Hey, you remember me demonstrating the move, right? Practice it on your own, and the first thing we'll do at our

next session is have you try it on me!"

Lilypaw's eyes widened with excitement, to my relief. "No way! That sounds great!" She flicked her tail eagerly. "Go on ahead, Lilypetal. I'm going to stay here and start practicing!"

I let out a warm purr and touched my nose affectionately to Lilypaw's head. "You're the best, Lilypaw." Then I turned and began to run across camp. "I'll see you later!"

I could just hear Lilypaw's farewell behind me as I quickly trotted along the cold cave floor, and as I looked ahead, I could already see the ThunderClan leader, my best friend, and my mate waiting by the entrance as Bramblestar had said.

And I had to admit, my heart was suddenly overwhelmed with *several* different emotions as my gaze rested on the golden brown tabby pelt of my mate.

I'd been busy with Lilypaw, and he'd been on patrol, and we hadn't seen each other or spoken to each other yet today.

Of course, I was always more than thrilled to see my mate. I'd already missed him *so* much, and even just getting a glimpse of him still made my heart flip upside down every single time*, and after my nightmare last night, I could not be more grateful that he is here with me...*

But I also couldn't help but feel my stomach twist with fear and reluctance, knowing for *certain* that he was going to catch on to my discomfort and fatigue – he didn't know about the nightmare from last night, and I definitely could have told him *more* about ones I'd had in the past.

But I knew that if he did, he'd worry himself sick. That had happened too many times already, and I *hated* it so much. *But I just have to keep reassuring him,* I told myself. *And plus, he'll just tell me to rest, which is the last thing I feel like I should do right now.*

I then took yet another deep breath. *I shall continue to play it cool. For my sake and his.*

I tried to push down that fear and reluctance, focusing on the overwhelming amount of love and affection I felt as I ran up to my mate, touching my nose to his as I made it to the three cats. "Good morning," I purred, the sound rising in my throat before I pulled away and gave a quick shake of my head. "Or afternoon, rather."

Thornclaw's pale blue eyes were full of affection, though I could already see the concern lingering there as well, to my dismay. "Good afternoon, Lilypetal." He then flicked an ear. "As much as I love that you're a mentor and get to train an apprentice... I'm glad you ditched her for now. I like looking at you."

I continued to purr, rolling my eyes fondly as Thornclaw nuzzled his muzzle into my cheek. From the corner of my eye, I could see Squirrelflight shooting Bramblestar a mocking glare. "Bramblestar," Squirrelflight drawled, "why don't you talk to *me* like that?"

Bramblestar looked genuinely alarmed. "What!? I do!"

"Mmkay," Squirrelflight replied, her eyes gleaming through narrowed slits. She turned away, heading toward the camp entrance as she flicked Bramblestar's chin with her tail. "Let's go."

I had to suppress more purrs, flashing Bramblestar a humored, apologetic look as he glanced back at Thornclaw and me, wide-eyed, before hurrying after his mate. "Squirrelflight, I do!" he insisted. "Don't I? Do you want me to talk to you like that more?"

"No, you mouse-brain!" Squirrelflight's voice called from outside. "I just have to keep you on your paws sometimes."

I then heard Bramblestar let out a long, exhausted sigh. "Mission accomplished."

Thornclaw and I exchanged another glance, letting out purrs of amusement before following our two Clanmates out into the forest.

With Squirrelflight and Bramblestar leading a few tail-lengths ahead, my stomach already felt hollow as Thornclaw stepped closer, his fur brushing against mine. His pale blue eyes still glowing with both affection and concern. *Just play it cool,* I reminded myself.

"I missed you this morning," Thornclaw murmured. "I actually woke up for a moment before dawn even arrived, and you were already gone."

"I missed you too," I replied, trying to ignore his searching gaze. "Well, you know how inconsistent my sleep has been lately! I woke up and wasn't able to fall back asleep, so I decided to make myself useful."

He sighed quietly. "As you do..." Thornclaw took a deep breath, his gaze softening again. "Well, how are you today? Are... you feeling okay?"

I nodded enthusiastically. "Just fine! And I just finished a really good training session with Lilypaw, so I'm definitely feeling more awake now."

"Good," Thornclaw said, though, unfortunately for me, it was obvious he wasn't buying it. "But... should you rest when we get back to camp? I'm glad you're feeling more awake, but you still seem a little tired."

Gosh darn it! Alarm shot through me. "I do?"

He gave me a reassuring look, like he could read my thoughts and guess I was worried other cats had noticed. "You can have fatigue in your eyes and simultaneously still be the most beautiful she-cat in the world," he then purred to me.

I met his gaze with a loving look and couldn't help giving him a quick lick on the cheek. "Thank you." I shook my head again, my heart racing with determination to reassure my mate that I was okay. "Yes, I'm a little sleepy still, but it's no biggie!"

Thornclaw sighed and closed his eyes. "Lilypetal, you can only say that so many times before it comes back to bite you."

Panic fluttered in my chest, and I wasn't sure how to respond. I glanced back at my mate and saw the visible worry in his eyes.

"Yes, your sleep has been inconsistent, that's for darn sure," he continued, his voice gentler but more serious. "But Lilypetal, I know

you're still having those nightmares. That's why you couldn't sleep."

My heart *raced* as I struggled for an answer, so Thornclaw pressed on. "Right?"

I sighed, finally giving in. "Yes, Thornclaw," I finally answered, my voice breathy with exasperation. "But they're just nightmares."

"Your eyes always tell a different story," my mate replied quickly. "They especially do this morning." His gaze hardened. "Lilypetal, what happened in this latest dream that made you refuse to go back to sleep at practically *moonhigh?* I wish you would tell me."

I hesitated, and for a moment, I actually considered spilling *everything* to the love of my life – I had to admit, keeping it all inside spinning in my head wasn't doing me any favors. But I quickly reminded myself of every reason why I should *not*, and tried to tell him that. "Thornclaw... I don't want to worry you."

"To heck with that!" he snapped, causing me to flick my ears. "I'm fine being the one up panicking at moonhigh about your nightmares if it means I know what they are and what's going on with you!"

My heart sank as I noticed the glint of hurt in his eyes. Great StarClan, how I hated acting like this toward him, and I hoped with everything that I was doing the right thing... as *wrong* as it felt. "You haven't been honest with me lately, Lilypetal," Thornclaw added quietly.

I let out a shaky, frustrated sigh, and I had to push back uncertainty and guilt once again. "Thornclaw-"

"You all still back there?"

Thornclaw and I seemed to flick our ears simultaneously at the sound of our ThunderClan leader's voice, also shooting our gazes ahead at the same time towards our two Clanmates still walking in front of us. But they seemed to be slowing their paces, coming to a stop in a small clearing that actually had somewhat dry ground.

And as we padded up to meet them, I almost found that I couldn't move with how much guilt and panic I was feeling all of the

sudden. I couldn't even look at my mate as we then settled down in front of Squirrelflight and Bramblestar.

The ginger she-cat and dark brown tabby tom's eyes were both narrowed as they seemed to be scanning our surroundings.

Squirrelflight slowed and glanced back at the rest of us, her whiskers twitching thoughtfully. "Hm. I don't know about you all, but it's seriously looking like this flooding might let up soon." She looked down at her slightly muddy paw, flexing it. "I'm not cringing in disgust fully each time I take a step."

Bramblestar purred with amusement. "You're right - things are drying up." He let out a long sigh and lifted his gaze toward the sky, where the sun was already beginning its slow descent toward the treetops. "If it were earlier in the day, I'd suggest that we stop by the stone hollow to see what it looks like."

"Should we plan for that tomorrow?" Thornclaw asked. He took a quick glance around the clearing, and I was certain he hadn't paid much attention to our territory before we reached it. "This is all definitely giving me hope. I could lead the patrol?"

I tried to nod eagerly. "I would love to be there too!" I caught the almost inaudible sigh Thornclaw let out beside me, and my chest tightened. "I'm *so* curious to see if we can return there soon."

Next to me, his reply came taut and controlled. "I'm more than glad to just bring you back a report, Lilypetal."

I sighed softly, my head shaking. "Thornclaw, don't worry."

"No, actually, that sounds good, Thornclaw," Bramblestar said, cutting in. "Thank you." He turned his gaze to me. "Lilypetal, you've been on so many patrols lately - almost more than Thornclaw, which is a feat." Thornclaw sniffed beside me, but he seemed restrained. "I'll go. You stay back and keep the camp in order while we're gone." Bramblestar nodded toward Squirrelflight. "With this one there, that's going to be difficult."

Squirrelflight spun around, green eyes wide. "Excuse me!?"

Bramblestar stood up and gave a flick of his tail. "Who says I can't keep you on your paws too?"

Squirrelflight only groaned and rolled her eyes as Bramblestar flicked his tail towards deeper into our territory. "Here," he continued, already moving ahead, "let's keep going. There's one area close by that Sandstorm told me lots of cats have had luck with hunting."

With that, Bramblestar and Squirrelflight continued along deeper into the forest. I looked to my side, confused for a moment, as Thornclaw didn't immediately move beside me. He was staring ahead at our Clanmates with narrowed eyes.

But it only took me a moment to realize that he was waiting for them to be out of earshot, because eventually, he shot his gaze back at me, his eyes full of disbelief. "Lilypetal, are you crazy?"

I snorted and shrugged. "Well—"

"No, no, no. I'm sorry. You're not crazy," Thornclaw corrected quickly, fixing me with a hard gaze. "You're not crazy. But why in the name of StarClan would you volunteer yourself for that patrol?"

I sighed, rolling my eyes as I stood up and began following Bramblestar and Squirrelflight. "Thornclaw, you know I'm having to compensate for all of my silly tiredness and Ashfur messiness by trying to do everything I can as a deputy. And I can't step back or give in with everything going on. Especially..." I took in a shaky breath. "Especially now that we've lost Seedpaw and Dustpelt. I can't give up on ThunderClan now."

He fell into step beside me. "Does surrendering going on one patrol mean you're giving up on ThunderClan?"

I gave another shrug. "Maybe not," I admitted, "but my head is sure going to tell me that."

"Your head has given you a hard time lately, Lilypetal," Thornclaw murmured, his pale blue eyes narrowed. "Do you ever wonder if not working it constantly would do you some good?"

"Working it constantly is what I *need* to do!" I shot back. "Otherwise everyone will think I'm weak." I then shut my eyes for just a moment. "Otherwise I'll just... *dwell* on it all. And I can't dwell." I shook my head sharply. "But Thornclaw, I don't even need to dwell! I told you, they're just silly nightmares-"

"And visions, and *flashbacks*, Lilypetal!" he interrupted. "I know that you're still having them even if you don't tell me about all of them. Which... I *still* can't believe."

"I don't need to!" I insisted. "Because I'm getting through them, as full of thistlefluff as they may make me feel sometimes!" I took a deep breath, trying to harden my gaze. "Thornclaw, you have nothing to worry about."

It was silent for a few horrible, long moments. And I hated the disappointed, frustrated look that then crossed Thornclaw's face. "I'm starting to wonder if you take me for a fool, Lilypetal."

My breath caught. "What?"

"Hurry up, you two!" Squirrelflight then called from ahead. "We don't have all day!"

I exchanged a hurt, worried look with Thornclaw before lifting my head and calling back, "Oh, don't get your fur in a knot! We'll be right there!"

I glanced back at Thornclaw one last time, hating the direction our conversation had taken — hating the betrayed look in his eyes — but I forced myself to push through as I padded ahead toward Bramblestar and Squirrelflight, who were already scanning the area with their noses lifted to the air.

A couple of heartbeats later, I heard Thornclaw's pawsteps following behind me. I could barely hear them though with how loudly my heart was pounding in my ears. *I'll just have to hope he blows it off,* I told myself. *For now, we just all have to hunt... and act like everything is fine.*

And honestly, I could totally see why cats had had luck hunting

here – this was the driest patch of ThunderClan territory that I had seen so far, and I could even *scent* the prey in the air already. We were definitely at the tail-end of this flood, thank StarClan.

But there was no celebrating that right now. My head was too full for that.

Squirrelflight shifted her gaze, nodding toward Bramblestar. "So, how do you suggest we go about this?"

Bramblestar narrowed his amber eyes thoughtfully. "Hm. Well, we could all go together, so that we have four sets of eyes able to spot any semblance of prey."

I nearly flinched as Thornclaw padded past me. He flicked his gaze toward me only briefly before speaking. "Or we could split up. Two and two?" he suggested. "Sure, it's only two sets of eyes per group, but we'd be covering more ground."

Bramblestar nodded as I flashed Thornclaw a suspicious gaze. "That sounds good to me."

"Great," Thornclaw murmured with a nod. "You and Squirrelflight, and then me and Lilypetal?"

Squirrelflight exchanged an affectionate glance with Bramblestar while I narrowed my eyes at Thornclaw. "Great idea. Maybe Bramblestar will say some nice things to me along the way."

Bramblestar let out an exasperated huff. "Squirrelflight, are you seriously-"

"Paws, Bramblestar, paws!" she cut in, flicking her tail as she led her mate off in one direction through the forest. "Good luck, you two!"

Bramblestar shot her a look of mocking contempt before giving Thornclaw and me a brief nod. "Let's meet back here once the sun is just above the trees!"

"That's fine," Thornclaw replied.

I gave a sharp nod toward them. "No problem! Good luck to you all

too."

Once they were out of earshot, reluctance and hurt still churning in my chest, I turned to face Thornclaw. "Sneaky move."

He sighed and gave a helpless shrug. "What else am I supposed to do, Lilypetal? I've tried to talk to you for *days* to no avail. You tell me you're fine, and I *want* to agree with you - but you're not, and there's nothing you can say to convince me otherwise."

"None of this is new, Thornclaw!" I snapped. "I've been like this since Ashfur's sorry pelt disappeared into nothingness during the Great Battle! This is just how it's going to be, and there's nothing I can do about it. I've been trying to tell you that every time you talk to me."

"I hate to disagree with you again," my mate replied sternly. "I've only seen you deteriorate, Lilypetal. And I can't even begin to tell you how much it pains me to see it." His voice faltered. "There's definitely nothing that *I* seem to be able to do about it."

My ears flattened. "How in the name of StarClan am I deteriorating?"

Thornclaw sighed and rolled his eyes. "Lilypetal, my gosh. I know you better than anyone, and I can see right through you." He then hesitated for a moment. "But even if I couldn't... when I found out you had an episode when you went to pick up the Twoleg pelts a few days ago, I can't help but wonder if you're still having a hard time."

I felt my stomach practically drop. *What in the name of StarClan?*

Shock and anger surged through me all at once. "How did you find out about that?"

"Bramblestar told me," Thornclaw admitted, "after I practically *pressed* him, Lilypetal! I'd already figured out you weren't going to tell me about it, that's for sure."

I closed my eyes, suddenly drowning in guilt. "Thornclaw... like I said before, I didn't want to worry you."

"And you think not telling me anything is going to spare me?" he shot back.

"I knew you'd worry more than you should if I told you what I'm dealing with!"

"Lilypetal," Thornclaw then meowed, his voice rough with emotion, "have you forgotten what I've told you before? Worrying about you is something I'm *grateful* I get to do, but you're not even giving me the *chance*."

I shut my eyes again, letting out a tired sigh – I was practically in a fog of disbelief that this conversation was happening. "Thornclaw..."

"So I have to resort to asking you whatever I can," he continued, "and doing what I can to make sure you're taking care of yourself."

"And Thornclaw," I said quietly through a sigh, "I appreciate that more than you could ever know. I hope you know that."

"Really?" he asked, his eyes full of uncertainty.

I widened my eyes at my mate – hardly believing what I'd just heard. "What, do you doubt it?"

"No, no, but..." His voice wavered. "With how much you're pushing me away..."

He then let out a huff, as if giving in. "I'm worried that you're starting to *resent* me with how much I'm having to pester you."

As one would expect, my heart shattered with those words. I couldn't even believe they'd come out of Thornclaw's mouth. "Thornclaw, that is *not* true at all!" I had to collect myself before continuing. "I'm just saying I don't think you *need* to pester me."

"Lilypetal, if I'm being fully honest," he replied, "I think I *do* need to pester you. I really, *really* don't want to be controlling, but I want to least tell you what I'm thinking and what I'm seeing while I still have the chance." His voice softened, but was full of desperation. "And I'm praying to StarClan that you'll listen."

I then managed to let out a bitter huff. "You make it sound like I've gone deaf!"

"No," he said firmly. "You've gone quiet. And that scares me more."

I turned away, not even being able to look at my mate in the eyes anymore. "Thornclaw, I'm still standing, aren't I? I'm still doing everything I'm supposed to do."

"That's exactly my point," Thornclaw then meowed solemnly. "You're doing what you're *supposed* to do - but you're not living anymore, Lilypetal. You're surviving." His voice cracked. "You're pushing away those that care about you. You're not listening to yourself, even if you feel like you are. There's a difference. I..."

I finally looked back at him to find his eyes were full of love and complete worry and despair. "I really, really hate seeing you like this," he continued. "And... I hope you remember that I love you no matter what you're going through. But... I've never seen you this way before, and it hurts me."

"*This way?*" I repeated, trying not to let my voice rise. "What, you mean crazy?"

"Lilypetal, no," Thornclaw said, his voice heavy with exhaustion. "But... you're not fully yourself. As much as I see you trying to hold onto that bright, spirited, optimistic, and determined she-cat that I am so deeply in love with... I worry you're losing her the harder you try." He took a deep breath as I simply stared at him in dismay. "Lilypetal, I want you to get better. And I'm just being honest when I say that you won't with the way you're handling it right now."

I stared shamefully down at my paws, silently digesting every word.

"Listen," he added more softly, "keep things from me if you really want to. I understand. I just encourage you to tell *someone*."

I could hardly speak for a moment, the weight of my mate's words making me want to sink slowly down to the center of the earth. And when I finally spoke, even though it was hoarse and quiet, it seemed to echo through the entire forest. "Thornclaw..."

He simply shook his head. "We should probably try to get at least one catch or two before we meet back up with Bramblestar and Squirrelflight."

For a moment, I wasn't sure if I should try and bring Thornclaw back to our conversation – there was so much I felt like I could say, but all that could come out for now was, "I..." I sighed. "Okay."

I stood slowly, my legs so shaky it felt like effort just to remain upright. Thornclaw was already facing the trees, scenting the air. Even just the sight of his back made me want to sink down to the ground right now. "Thornclaw?" I called out to him, my voice nearly shaking.

"Hm?" He didn't look back.

My voice cracked, full of guilt and hurt. "I don't resent you. I could never, *ever* resent you. Please know that."

He lowered his head to his paws for a moment. He then seemed to be deep in thought for a moment before lifting his head back up, briefly looking back at me and giving me a nod. But I hated to see that his eyes were still full of hurt. "Okay. I'm glad."

He turned away once more, flicking his ears. "I think I smell a chaffinch up ahead." He then began to pad off. "Let's see if we can grab it."

I watched him go for a moment, hardly feeling like I could function before weakly, reluctantly following. "Alright..."

My paws felt heavy, but it wasn't just exhaustion - it was the most guilt I'd ever felt, almost. Seeing the hurt in Thornclaw's eyes had cut through me like a *claw*. How could I let him think I resented him? I didn't. I could *never*.

And yet here I was, hiding pieces of myself, telling him I was fine, pushing him away and letting him worry anyway.

I hated that I'd put him through that. I hated that he was thinking like this. *And... I hate that he doesn't think that his words matter to me... because Great StarClan, how they do. More than anyone else.*

Maybe it's because they do that I've not wanted to listen to him...

I then let out a heavy sigh as I forced myself forward. And with every pawstep, the image of my mate's hurt eyes followed me, a silent reminder of my own failings.

Chapter 21

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

My fur was tingling with cold as the temperature seemed to be slowly dropping inside of the tunnels from where I sat near the warriors den. That, along with the pink and orange light that leaked through the tunnel entrance told me that this day was almost over.

And what a day it had been – most of it had actually consisted of me joining a border patrol that Thornclaw led with Squirrelflight, Bramblestar, Brackenfur and Lionblaze to take a look at the ThunderClan camp – the *real* one. And I still couldn't believe it, but we had actually arrived there to see that the flooding had gone down significantly. Seeing all of the damaged dens had been disheartening, sure, but Bramblestar seemed to think that we'd be able to return sooner rather than later. Thank *StarClan*.

So, despite the cold, the ThunderClan camp seemed to be in higher spirits than it had been in a *while*.

In Goldenshine's world though? I wasn't sure yet.

I couldn't believe that it hadn't even been a full two days since my trip to the Moonpool, the one where the travel back had not only resulted in encountering Breezepelt and practically having to *fend* him off, but it had resulted in mine and Swiftflight's anger, anger that had brought him to *go* to WindClan and tell Breezepelt off.

Quite frankly, I was shocked that he hadn't been shred to bits in the process, whether that was by Lilypetal, Bramblestar, Onestar, or even Breezepelt himself. *Or me, once I found out,* I then thought bitterly, my head beginning to shake slowly as I recalled my son very hesitantly revealing to me what he had done. *I cannot believe he was going to try and move on with his life without telling me about that. But...*

I then felt my heart sink and grow heavy with guilt as I looked up to see the dusty gray pelt of Dustystorm, who had just now returned to camp with Sandstorm, Whitewing, Cloudtail, and Brightheart. I hardly paid attention to the fact that every single one of them had at least one catch in their jaws as they went to place them on the growing fresh-kill pile.

Instead, my gaze was locked on my mate, who luckily didn't seem to notice me at first. *But... now I have things that I'm withholding from him too, and I hate it*, I then thought – I had hardly seen any signs of Dustystorm since my StarClan-cursed time in the forest that night. *How would he even take it?*

I then let out a sigh, closing my eyes, laying my head on the tunnel floor, and putting my paws over my head. *I left camp in the middle of the night saying that I wasn't meeting with Breezepelt, and then I do proceed to run into him, and then he doesn't leave me alone. I wouldn't blame any cat for taking this specific situation the wrong way...*

I then couldn't help but let out an exasperated groan, my head still in the ground. *Great StarClan, maybe I need to stop being a stubborn brat and-*

"Geez, does the tunnel floor smell really good or something?"

I flicked my ears, and my stomach twisted at the very familiar voice that I heard, and I forced my head up to see that it was Dustystorm himself approaching me. To my surprise, his pale blue gaze was filled with nothing but concern and warmth. "I've never seen a cat dig their nose into it so intensely."

I managed a small sniff, rolling my eyes as I rubbed some of the cave floor wetness off of my face with one of my paws. "Just figured I'd take it in before we leave to go back to the hollow, I guess." I then narrowed my eyes as Dustystorm let out a small purr, padding forward once again before proceeding to sit down beside me. "What are you doing over here?"

Dustystorm sniffed, looking bewildered that I couldn't possibly know why. "Well, when I return to camp to see you looking sadly over at me before proceeding to bury your head into the ground, I

suppose I want to come over and make sure you're okay."

I let out a sigh, staring past the tom. "I'm surprised you even want to look at my face right now."

"Oh, I *always* want to look at your face," Dustystorm them muttered, bringing me to roll my eyes. But my mate's voice softened with his next words. "Goldenshine, I don't care where the two of us are. If you look distressed, I want to check on you."

I then was surprised to see him give a shy shrug as he looked away from me. "I'm surprised you want to look at *my* face."

"Well, it is hard," I muttered.

Dustystorm snorted. "Gee, thanks."

"You know what I mean, mouse-brain," I sighed as I got on my paws and sat up. "If you couldn't tell, it's taking me a while to process what you told me a few days ago."

Dustystorm closed his eyes for a moment. "Oh, I know. I..." He then let out a sigh. "I've been trying really hard to give you your space." He then flashed me an uncomfortable look. "Well, you know, somewhat. I hope you can understand me checking on you when you leave in the middle of the night."

At Dustystorm's mention of the other night, my stomach then seemed to twist upside down as all of my guilt seemed to come to a head, and I was filled with an indescribable amount of nerves. "Yeah..."

Dustystorm's gaze then locked with mine, his own eyes filled with guilt. "Goldenshine, I really hope that you know that I didn't think you were going off to meet with Breezepelt that night. I've *never* thought that you were doing *anything* behind my back this whole time."

I couldn't even reply to the tom at first, my fear and my own guilt becoming almost unbearable as I tried to keep what I was hiding from flooding out like a waterfall. And Dustystorm being his perfect, understanding and gracious self wasn't helping matters.

"I have always trusted you completely," my mate continued, "but when I was trying to tell you how much I don't trust *Breezepelt*, I feel like my words came out all wrong."

I then found my eyes screwing shut, bracing myself. *Great StarClan, here we go...*

"I know, you probably still don't want to hear anything from me right now, but..." Dustystorm then took a deep breath. "Goldenshine, all I was trying to tell you was-"

The words then flew out of my mouth without me thinking. "I ran into Breezepelt in the forest that night, Dustystorm!"

I immediately slapped my tail over my mouth, surprised that I hadn't even let my mate finish talking before I let those words slip out. I knew I wanted to confess them this whole time at some point – the fact that I hadn't told him for this long was eating me alive, if that wasn't already obvious, but I hated that I'd already waited this long to tell my mate about it. I guess I could have respected him a bit more and let him finish his sentence...

But too late now. As I had expected, my mate's pale blue eyes grew wide, and I knew I had to elaborate. "I swear to StarClan that I wasn't meeting with him. I was on my way back from the Moonpool and that piece of crowfood just happened to be wandering around the WindClan border, which you know is along the path back to ThunderClan."

To my dismay, Dustystorm sighed and closed his eyes, and as I had feared, he looked distressed. "Goldenshine..." he then breathed.

"He practically *chased* after me and tried to get me to talk to him, but I wouldn't let him," I went on. "I managed to get away after he made a few attempts. Pitiful ones."

"Goldenshine-"

"And I *hate* that I didn't tell you that immediately," I then nearly cried out. "I was still pretending to be mad at you. *And* I worried that you'd take it in the wrong way, which I understand if you did."

I then took a step closer to Dustystorm, trying to search his gaze. "But you're my mate and I love you so much and you *need* to know. And..."

A realization then hit me *brutally*. "And I'm an idiot for thinking that you'd respond in any way that wasn't understanding," I then spilled out. "You were understanding a few days ago too, but I was just being my stubborn self, and I-"

"Goldenshine!" Dustystorm's meow was louder so that he could cut me off, but I was surprised to hear that he was purring as he set one of his paws over mine. "Take a breath, please."

I let out an exhausted sigh. "Do I even deserve one?"

"Yes," Dustystorm purred. "I'd argue several."

"Foxdung," I immediately retorted, all of my feelings of remorse I'd felt since we argued rising like the flood water. "I've done nothing but shut you out for the last few days. And then I didn't tell you about yesterday night!"

Dustystorm simply let out a huff. "Goldenshine, the only reason that I'm upset about yesterday night is because Breezepelt came after you, *not* because I think that you were secretly meeting with him."

"Good. I wasn't," I managed to say confidently before I gave a sheepish shrug. "But I still should have told you sooner..."

Dustystorm sniffed, his eyes full of affection. "We acknowledge that you were being stubborn. We can move past that now." I actually managed a purr at the tom's words as I rolled my eyes. "Like I said, Goldenshine, this whole thing was never a matter of me not trusting you. But you..."

I then watched as my mate seemed to hesitate. "You..."

"You can just say that I jumped to that conclusion. It's fine," I finally finished for Dustystorm.

But my mate shook his head. "No, no. the way I said it didn't help much either." However, he then flashed me a slightly wary look. "I

guess I just didn't get enough time to fix it..."

"Sorry..."

"It's okay, really," Dustystorm then meowed softly as he twinned his tail with mine. "Goldenshine, I trust you. And... I know that if you were to give Breezepelt a chance, it would be with good reason. I just would hope that he is being truthful. Otherwise..."

He then let out a shaky sigh. "Otherwise, I'd kick myself every day knowing that I let him hurt you again."

I stared back at the tom affectionately, hardly being able to stand how genuinely fearful he sounded. "I know, Dustystorm. I know... and I..." I then sighed, mine being even shakier than my mate's. "I can't believe I thought that you'd mean anything else. You're the kindest tom in the whole world, what was I thinking?"

"Thanks, I know!" Dustystorm purred, his gaze smug.

I rolled my eyes. "Great StarClan."

"Kidding!" Dustystorm then meowed as he touched his nose to my cheek. "Kidding. Goldenshine, I..." He then took a deep breath. "It terrifies me to say it, but I understand if one day you wanted to give Breezepelt a chance. While I trust the romantic connection is gone, you'll always have some connection, and he'll always be Swiftflight's father."

I could only shake my head in amazement for a moment. "And you continue to be the kindest and most understanding tom in the world," I then meowed to my mate. "*Too* understanding, I'd argue."

"Huh?"

"You don't have to pretend you'd be okay with it, Dustystorm."

"But I am!"

"No, no. Don't," I continued to reassure the dusty gray tom as I gave a sharp nod. "You don't need to, because I am staying away from Breezepelt's sorry pelt for the rest of my life, if I can help it."

"Oh, Goldenshine," Dustystorm then started worriedly, "you're not doing that because of me, are you?"

"No way! This is on my own accord."

"Okay, but it sounds like this might be difficult," my mate then said worriedly, his eyes dark. "Goldenshine, he ambushed you at the WindClan border."

I let out a huff. "Unfortunately."

"Great StarClan, that makes me nervous," Dustystorm then sighed, his head shaking. "And you'd already told him to go away before."

"I know," I then sniffed as I recalled something else that Dustystorm still didn't know. "After I told Swiftflight about what happened, he almost *immediately* went to WindClan to tell him off."

"*What?*" Dustystorm looked as alarmed as if I'd told him that I'd gone to Breezepelt. "And Swiftflight made it back in one piece?"

"My thoughts exactly!" I then shrugged. "Believe it or not, Breezepelt said that he was going to listen."

Dustystorm's eyes were wide. "Well, do *you* believe him?" He then furrowed his eyebrows. "...or not?"

"No," I immediately answered. "But either way, I'm not going to be around to see if he does. Swiftflight and I have both decided that we're not talking to him." I then let out an almost inaudible sniff. *Well, maybe...*

While I was annoyed at him for going to speak with Breezepelt behind my back, I once again had to look past my stubbornness and appreciate what he was trying to do. I could only pray to StarClan that it *did* work. We'd hopefully be at least somewhat okay as long as we both swore to never talk to Breezepelt again. *Admittedly, I can't be sure if Swiftflight will do that...*

I wanted to believe that my son would listen to me and do what was best, but I wasn't dumb (in this instance), I could see the hesitant look in Swiftflight's eyes while we'd been talking.

Truthfully, out of me and Swiftflight, I'm not sure if I'm the one Dustystorm needs to worry about giving in...

And it was my mate's words that finally pulled me away from my thoughts. "Fair enough..." Dustystorm sighed, and I looked back over at him to see that his eyes were closed. But he opened them again after just a moment, revealing pale blue eyes full of fear and worry. "Goldenshine, seriously, please tell me if you need my help with this. At *all.*" He then sniffed and gave a shrug. "And if I need to reassure you that I trust you throughout any of it, I will."

My gosh. How was I so silly?

I was practically overwhelmed with love as I looked back at my mate, and I couldn't help but touch my nose to his for a few moments. "Thank you, Dustystorm," I meowed softly to him. "If anything happens, I promise that I will let you know."

I then looked away from the tom for a moment as I sighed. "But you don't need to reassure me that you trust me, great StarClan," I meowed before looking back at him again worriedly. "I make things so complicated. Wouldn't you rather be with someone that doesn't drag you through the mud?"

Dustystorm let out a quiet purr, his pale blue gaze full of love. "Where's the fun in that?"

With those words, I simply rolled my eyes, but a purr was rising in my throat as Dustystorm let out a chuckle and nuzzled his muzzle into my cheek. I fully let myself purr as I took in his scent and basked in my relief. *Wow, I guess talking things out as opposed to pouting sometimes goes in your favor...* I thought to myself. *I'm a seasoned warrior and a long-time mother, but I guess I've still got to learn these things...*

After a few moments, I was then surprised to feel my mate stiffen beside me. I pulled away from him to see that he was now staring straight at the camp entrance, his pale blue eyes narrowed. Before I even was able to ask him what was wrong, he let out a quiet, bitter meow. "Heads-up – black she-cat making a poor attempt to sneak out at dusk."

My eyes immediately widened as my ears flicked. "What?" I then followed the tom's gaze, just barely being able to catch Nightwing's black tail disappearing through the entrance. "No way..."

Dustystorm and I then exchanged a shocked glance – truthfully, this had been one of the only times we'd actually *caught* her in the act of sneaking out in a while – aside from the one time we'd followed her, and the time she'd tried to leave *right after* the flood.

And as disheartening as it was to see Nightwing *still* trying to be secretive, I could not be more thankful that we'd caught her in the act. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That tends to be the case," Dustystorm meowed warmly before beginning to pad forward. "Let's go!"

"Wait!" I called out, brushing my tail against Dustystorm's flank to stop him. "We can't follow right behind her!"

My mate paused, bewildered as he looked back at me. "We can't?"

"No!" I immediately answered. "If she hears or smells any signs of us, at best she'll turn around and come back, and at worst she'll rip us to shreds."

With my explanation, Dustystorm simply stared at me, amused and hesitant, before I finally gave a nod and pelted through the ThunderClan camp. "Okay, *now* we go!"

Dustystorm purred as he began to follow me. "That was just a few heartbeats!"

I sighed and shook my head as I led Dustystorm out of camp and into the forest. "Great StarClan, do any of the toms in my life know what a head start is?"

"Oh, don't worry, I do," Dustystorm meowed as he caught up to me, giving me a wink. "Sometimes I give you one when we race."

I snorted. "Oh, you *wish* that was why I beat you so much." I then stopped for a moment, lifting my nose up in the air, my friend's scent immediately flooding through my nose. "Catching her scent?"

I then asked my mate.

Dustystorm sniffed beside me. "She's my sister, of course I am." And after the two of us exchanged a determined, mischievous glance as Dustystorm lifted his head up in the air. "Onward!"

I couldn't help but let out a purr as Dustystorm excitedly padded ahead, and I let him lead the way as we began to follow Nightwing's fresh scent. Sure, we were on a mission to figure out why our sister and best friend was avoiding us – something that had been very tough to deal with, but I still managed to be filled with so much joy as I followed just behind my mate. *Goodness, I'm never letting my stubborn mouse-brain get between us ever again*, I thought. *Not when it keeps us from adventures like this too!*

I then forced myself to fully focus on said adventure, making sure I still had Nightwing's scent as we continued on through ThunderClan territory.

Unfortunately, as I had expected, the scent was already leading us right where I had expected it to – along the same path that went towards the Moonpool, that lead to exactly where I'd actually *seen* Nightwing run off to – the Twolegplace. *StarClan curse my silly problems that kept me from following her!*

I then gave a surprised flick of my ears, quickening my pace so that I was now flanking Dustystorm. "Oh, yeah. Something else that I haven't told you yet..." As I began to speak, Dustystorm flicked his ears and widened his eyes with intrigue. "On my way *to* the Moonpool, I ran into Nightwing. She was elusive and dodgy as usual, and I wish I'd gotten more time to get things out of her, but..."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as Dustystorm then came to a hard stop. "What? What's wrong?"

My mate let out a huff of frustration. "I just completely lost her scent." I then let out a gasp as I realized that I now couldn't smell it either. "That piece of dung probably rolled herself in something," Dustystorm then muttered.

But I simply let out a satisfied huff. "No need to fret!" I meowed enthusiastically to the tom. "As I was just about to say... I figured out where she might be going before I had to hurry off to the Moonpool."

As Dustystorm's eyes widened, I flashed him a smug look and flicked my tail ahead. We had made it *right* to the spot where Nightwing and I had had our encounter, and I at least somewhat knew where to go from here. "That way!"

My mate's eyes narrowed. "Towards the Twolegplace?" The two of us then exchanged a worried look and began quickly padding ahead. "A former kittypet going to the Twolegplace... that's never good."

"My mother does it sometimes! And I would assume she's still loyal to ThunderClan," I tried to reassure the tom. "And anyway, we don't even know for sure if Nightwing is going *all* the way to the Twolegplace... she's just going in that direction."

"Very reassuring," Dustystorm muttered sarcastically. "Otherwise, Nightwing gave nothing away when you ran into her?"

I only had to think for a moment before shaking my head. "Not really. But I told her that I hope she doesn't let this secret push away everyone in her life that she cares about..."

Dustystorm snorted. "I don't know about everyone else, but at least with the two of us in her life, that won't fully happen... I hope." The tom then slowly came to a stop, lifting his nose in the air again. "Hey, whatever Nightwing used to get her scent off didn't last very long, because I think I have her scent again!"

"Are you kidding?" I asked excitedly before taking a big whiff and trying not to squeal with excitement. "Oh my gosh, you're right! It's faint, but it's there, and..."

I then looked worriedly back at Dustystorm. "...*still* leading towards the Twolegplace, it seems."

Dustystorm reflected my look back at me, but then gave a shake of

his head. "Well, what are we waiting for? We can't give her too much of a head start!"

With that, Dustystorm proceeded to lead the way once again, and I only had to look ahead at my mate for a few moments to see how genuinely anxious he was about this – his slightly bristled fur and clearly very full head gave me everything I needed to know. *Understandably*, I then thought to myself. *We've worried about Nightwing sneaking off for almost a moon now, and while we want to find out more about why, it almost gives us more to worry about once we do...*

And I actually felt my stomach twisting as the first Twoleg nest among many finally came into sight several fox-lengths ahead.

And with that sight, her scent was still strong. *Shoot.*

Dustystorm and I then exchanged another anxious glance as we padded ahead once again – our determination to find out what was going on fully overshadowing our distaste for having to walk towards a Twolegplace. And my heart continued to sink as Nightwing's scent became stronger and stronger, and Dustystorm and I found ourselves walking along a fence that connected to several Twoleg nests.

Beside me, Dustystorm was shaking his head, as if he'd already come to a certain conclusion in his mind. "Well, I guess Nightwing was the one all of those moons ago that hesitated about staying in ThunderClan when Firestar offered it to us."

"But then she decided to stay!" I meowed, giving my mate an encouraging nudge. "You really think that after all of these moons, *now* she'd realize that she has doubts?"

Dustystorm's eyes then narrowed. "Wasn't there that leader of ThunderClan a long time ago... what was his name, Pinestar? That literally went to be a kittypet after *leading* his Clan? He hadn't even been a kittypet before!"

"Yeah, that was really weird," I agreed, having been told about Pinestar when I was a kit. *For shame*. "But why would Nightwing

keep coming *back* to ThunderClan if she really wanted to be a kittypet?"

"Didn't Cloudtail do that once?" Dustystorm then put in. "He was getting Twoleg food, wasn't he?"

I couldn't help but purr with amusement. "Wow, the senior warriors really caught you up on old ThunderClan tails, huh?" After Dustystorm purred and gave a shrug, I narrowed my eyes with thought. "Well, then maybe Nightwing is just getting some Twoleg food."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but that would be the best case scenario."

After grunting in agreement, I found myself coming to an abrupt stop, raising my tail in front of Dustystorm to get him to pause.

Then, before he could event speak, I *shhhh'd* him as I glanced up at the white fence that was right next to us. "Heads-up, Nightwing *just* climbed this fence not too long ago."

Dustystorm's eyes widened as he padded up to join me at the fence, gaping his mouth open. "Whoa, we were just a few moments behind her!" He then flicked his ears as he seemed to spot a small gasp in the fence, and I anxiously watched as he used one of his eyes to look through it.

And just by the way my mate's shoulder's sank just a moment later, I could tell that his sister had been spotted. "And there she is..." Dustystorm then whispered, confirming my thoughts.

"You see her?" I tried not to let my eagerness raise my voice. "Inside of the yard? What is she doing?"

I hated seeing how dejected the dusty brown tom already looked. "Sitting at the backyard doorstep..." He then sighed, turning away from the hole. "Here, you can look. I can hardly stand it."

I watched Dustystorm worriedly as he backed away. "Are you okay?"

The tom sighed and shrugged in reply. "Suuurre. Okay as a cat can be that sees their sister drifting away from the Clans..." He then let out a huff. "...and me."

I ran my tail comfortingly along Dustystorm's flank, giving him a sympathetic look before stepping up and peeking through the fence gap myself. And once I did, my heart wanted to sink just as much as Dustystorm's probably already was.

Because there was Nightwing, sitting at the doorstep like Dustystorm said. Her back was to me, and she was sitting up straight with her head up and her tail lashing back and forth eagerly and almost... *nervously*.

And goodness, she looked as if the entire fresh-kill pile at home was about to be plopped right down in front of her. *Which, if one of our theories is right, maybe it is, in a way,* I thought jokingly. *However, I'm not sure if that's what's going on here...*

I then had to hold back a gasp as the door that Nightwing was standing in front of gently opened. I flicked my tail behind me, not sure if it possibly was slapping my mate in the face. "Dustystorm, someone opened the door!"

"Really?" the dusty gray tom whispered eagerly as he padded up behind me. "Can you see inside?"

"No, it's not opened enough. Darn it..." I then watched as Nightwing practically sprang up onto her paws, looking like she was on top of the world, before lightly trotting inside. "She went inside!" I then relayed to Dustystorm. "And..."

I then felt my stomach twist. "I think I hear a Twoleg's voice..." I then listened for another moment. "*and* a cat's..."

"You can?" Dustystorm asked. "Can you tell if it's at least a she-cat or tom?"

I immediately shook my head. "Nope, too far away." I then let out a frustrated huff as I heard a sound I'd only experienced a couple of times in my life. "And now the door is closed!"

"Darn it! Well, now what do we do?" Dustystorm meowed more loudly now that Nightwing was hopefully out of earshot. He then looked through the fence hole again. "All of the windows are shut and covered, so we can't peek inside!"

He then let out a huff and began to pace. "Well, we'd probably just see her stuffing her face with Twoleg food anyway. With how excited she looked, that seems to be the case."

I raised my eyebrows. "Oh, so you noticed that too?"

"How excited she looked to be there? Of course I did! It was *sickening*." The tom then began to shake his head. "That sneaky she-cat... and I can't believe she's coming here to get food for herself while all of the cats in ThunderClan have had to work *so* hard to find prey with all of this flooding."

He then came to a stop, sighing. "I thought she was better than this, Goldenshine."

I didn't answer Dustystorm immediately, my head spinning with thoughts as my eyes narrowed. "Well... maybe she is, Dustystorm." I then shook my head quickly. "In this sense, at least, because I'm actually not sure if she's eating Twoleg food."

Dustystorm almost seemed relieved for a moment, but with what I was going to reveal, I knew that would change quickly. "You don't?" he pressed.

"I don't. If Nightwing were eating Twoleg food, I really, really don't think she would just take it for herself, right? She'd bring some to the Clan if it meant they got something to eat."

Dustystorm gave a quick shake of his head and blinked, as if he was shocked he hadn't considered that of his sister. "That's true..." he murmured. "And if not, I think she would at least tell *us* what she was doing and share."

"Exactly," I went on with a sharp nod. "And sure, any cat would be excited at the thought of getting a meal, but..."

I then hesitated for a moment, causing my mate's eyes to widen

with desperation. "But *what*, Goldenshine?"

I narrowed my eyes for a moment as I tried to find the words. "I don't know... something about that demeanor... her excitement and eagerness and pure giddiness and almost... *nerves* as she waited paired with all of this secrecy... I..."

I then took a deep breath, meeting my mate with an even gaze. "I wonder if she's here to meet with someone, Dustystorm."

Dustystorm seemed to process my words for a few moments, but then began to shake his head slowly. "No way," he then meowed. "She wouldn't."

"I... I didn't think I would either," I then answered gravely, a chill running down my spine as I recalled my own stupidity.

A knowing look flashed through my mate's eyes. "So, then you mean to meet up with... someone she likes?"

"Considering she keeps going out of her way to see them this much... maybe someone she *loves*."

"*Loves*? I don't think Nightwing has ever even told me about someone she *likes* or even finds attractive. Well, no one but..." He hesitated for a moment before shaking his head. "Whatever. That can't be relevant."

I then gave a helpless shrug. "As far as finding a cat attractive, there was one she pointed out to me a long time ago, but it was a Clan cat." *And I don't even think she was attracted to Heathertail, right? She just thought she was pretty, which she for sure is! Breezepelt needs to keep her eyes on her at all times, I think.*

Dustystorm then cut through my thoughts. "Goldenshine, do you really think that's what's going on?"

I gave another shrug. "I mean, I can't be for sure, but... I'd know the signs more than most cats. I..." I then let out a shaky sigh. "I think Nightwing has maybe fallen for some kittypet, and tries to meet with them here as often as she can at this nest."

My mate shook his head, clearly astounded. "Oh my StarClan, what do we do now? Do we wait for her to come out and ask her if that's what's happening?"

I sniffed and shook my head with no hesitation. "You know I love a good confrontation, but... I'm not sure if we should. We have no idea how long she is going to be here." I then tilted my head back at Dustystorm. "Were you wanting to?"

He let out a huff as he looked over his shoulder back towards the forest. "I don't know... both of us were put on the dawn patrol tomorrow, weren't we? We'd be no help being two sleep-deprived balls of fur."

I let out a quiet purr. "True."

"And anyway, I doubt we'd get a thing out of her if we cornered her like this. In fact..." I then watched as Dustystorm's eyes seemed to flash with fear. "I think we'd *completely* lose her trust if she found out we'd been here. We..."

This time, his pale blue eyes flashed with *alarm*. "*Shoot*, Goldenshine, our scents! Even if we aren't here waiting for her, Nightwing will know that we were here!"

I gasped, nearly wanting to slap myself with my own tail. "Gosh darn-it!" I growled, instantly overwhelmed with panic as I began to look around. "Is there anything around here we can cover up our scent with? Oh!"

I then looked at Dustystorm urgently. "Maybe if a dog or something did its business right here, that would mask it?"

My mate gave me a deadpan look. "You skipped over a few steps there, Goldenshine."

I shook my head quickly as I paced again. "Well then, what do we do? We could grab some flowers, or leaves, or we possibly could-" I then had to blink my eyes shut as something cold and hard landed on my nose. "Ow!"

I then took a paw, wiping off my muzzle and looking at my wet

paw as more drops began to fall on my pelt. "Ugh, it's raining."

I heard Dustystorm gasp, and I looked back at him to see his eyes now blazing with joy. "Yes, Goldenshine, it's raining!" he meowed enthusiastically. "Our scents will be out of here in no time!"

It finally clicked, and I had to hold back another squeal. "No way! The rain went in our favor this time!"

I then began to pad away from the Twoleg nest, back out towards the forest. "Let's get back to camp, then! Even if we didn't have the dawn patrol, waiting out in this rain would be torturous." I then looked back at Dustystorm, watching him catch up to me. "I don't know about you, but I think we've found out *more* than we need to know, even if my theory is wrong."

"No, no, I agree," my mate immediately said with a nod. "Whatever she's doing, she's leaving her Clan almost every day to go to the Twolegplace for long periods of time. That's plenty to confront her with."

I then purred with amusement. "And if she really is meeting secretly with a cat, I'm tempted to have Bramblestar confront her!"

"Bramblestar? Why?"

"Being confronted by the ThunderClan leader certainly scared me back into shape all of those moons ago!"

"Great StarClan," Dustystorm purred, flashing me an amused, reassuring glance as I indirectly brought up the tom we'd been discussing earlier that day. "Either way, I hate that I have to question my sister's loyalty."

I gave my mate a comforting nudge, trying my best to ignore the rain that was already soaking our pelts. "We'll whip her back into shape. Don't worry," I tried to reassure him as the two of us then broke out into a run.

And of course, as reassuring as I was trying to be with Dustystorm, I was also sad to see what Nightwing was doing – I *hated* and had hated to see one of my best friends become so distant. But being

fully uncertain had almost been worse. I was now filled with a new determination at the fact and Dustystorm and I had come this far.

The two of us were going to get Nightwing to tell the truth, and I was no so thankful that me and Dustystorm were going to be able to do it together. *And hopefully, Breezepelt will keep his stupid tail away from all of it.*

Chapter 22

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

I had to admit, I was a bit nervous as I padded across the ThunderClan camp towards the warriors den, listening to the rainfall coming from outside of the tunnels... and from *right* above us in our shelter underground.

I'd heard that we were on a forward trajectory to return to our camp in the stone hollow, and I really hoped that this rain wouldn't delay that. *And if not that... hopefully this rain isn't heavy enough to kick us out of our makeshift camp too!* I thought as I then made my way through the warriors den entrance.

I then forced myself to take a deep breath as I sat down in my nest. *Whatever. That rain can chase ThunderClan all around the flooded lake if it wants to, as long as it doesn't take away any more of our Clanmates.*

I then couldn't help but flinch as I heard thunder crash from outside, and as I lied down, I dropped my chin onto my paws. *I wish I could say that was my only worry right now.*

I then blinked in surprise as something crossed my mind, and I found myself quickly lifting my head and trying to peer outside of the warriors den. *And I wish I knew where my mate is right now...* I then thought worriedly – the sun already *well* set and night time falling long after I'd gotten back from a hunting patrol.

"Don't worry, Swiftflight. Dustystorm and I passed Cherryfall gathering sticks near the lake with Emberheart and Molewhisker."

I then furrowed my eyebrows as the voice of my mother was followed by the golden brown tabby she-cat crawling into the warriors den, her gray eyes gleaming smugly. "She'll probably be in here in just a few. Great StarClan, how you worry"

"Sue me," I muttered to the she-cat.

However, I then gave a quick shake of my head as I realized something that my mother had had. "Hold on, did you say you and *Dustystorm?*"

"Sure did!"

My eyes then widened with surprise as the dusty gray tom came into the den right behind my mother. "Is that a surprise?" he then asked me, his pale blue eyes full of humor and curiosity.

I hesitated for a moment, genuinely not sure how I wanted to answer or how much I wanted to disclose. "...Nope," I answered, my voice unfortunately cracking in the process.

Goldenshine snorted, glancing skeptically at her mate. "I'm sold. I don't know about you."

I then sighed. "Come on, I just noticed that you all have seemed off in the last couple of days, so..." I then shifted uncomfortably. "I'm surprised to see that you all seem to be okay now, I guess."

I then looked at the two up and down, who were both completely soaked to the bone. "Well, for the most part."

"Keep talking like that and I'll shake my fur out right in your face," my mother teased, proceeding to exchange an affectionate look with Dustystorm. "Yes, we *are* okay now."

I couldn't help but sigh with *immense* relief. My worry about their fight hadn't been at the forefront of my mind, of course, but overwhelming, nevertheless. "Thank StarClan," I breathed. "What-"

I then shook my head quickly, cutting myself off. "Nevermind."

"What?" Dustystorm pressed, his eyes still full of humor as he tilted his head to the side.

I shifted uncomfortably once again. "I was going to ask what happened, but then I remembered that Goldenshine shaking her fur out in my face had been proposed."

"That was a joke!" Goldenshine then insisted.

"Foxdung."

"Anyway," Goldenshine muttered tautly, causing me to purr quietly, "We had a disagreement about Breezepelt."

My ears then flicked, and I felt my heart drop. "Shocker, right?" Goldenshine then meowed.

I narrowed my eyes. *I was right all along. I hate that I am.* "Shocker..." I then murmured, my head suddenly feeling extra full.

"I misspoke when I was telling Goldenshine how worried I was, and she was mad at me," Dustystorm went on to explain. He then gave his mate a nudge. "...for a few days."

I then couldn't help but stare wide-eyed at Goldenshine, bewildered. "For a *few days*?"

"Sue me," Goldenshine echoed me from earlier, bringing me to roll my eyes. "But then I decided to stop wasting my energy."

In some ways... I then thought bitterly. But I then blinked in surprise. *What am I saying?* "Thank StarClan," I then said out loud. "I'm glad you two are getting along again."

I then let out a huff as another thought crossed my mind, and my heart slightly sunk with disappointment. "...Breezepelt's really been causing some turmoil for *all* of us, huh?"

"Unfortunately," Goldenshine answered immediately, and as I had feared, her gaze was searching as she looked back at me. But she then touched her nose to Dustystorm's cheek, and they both began to pad forward towards their nest.

I then felt Goldenshine flick my ear with her wet tail as she passed by. "We just need to *move on* and *stay away*."

I flicked my ears and looked back over my shoulder, shocked by the almost *cold* undertones in my mother's voice. She was looking back at me, her eyes narrowed and questioning. "Goodnight, Swiftflight,"

she then meowed, her voice a bit lighter.

I barely flicked my tail back in farewell. "Goodnight..."

I then let out a sigh and dropped my chin to my nest once again, this time putting my paws over my head. *Why does it feel like I'm experiencing a lighter version of having to tread carefully constantly like I did with Ashfur in the Dark Forest?* I asked myself. *I feel like I've killed someone and Goldenshine's trying to scare me into confessing...*

I then let my eyes close for a moment. *But there's nothing to confess!*

My stomach then twisted slightly. *At least, I don't think...*

I then let out a frustrated huff and shook my head. *Of course there isn't. Talking to Breezepelt was a time where my emotions got to me, and for once, I don't think I should let them.*

My ears then flattened as some of Breezepelt's words from our last encounter echoed in my head. *I'm sure it took you moons to gain everyone's trust. That's what I'm willing to put in. And that means I'm going to take a chance while I have it.*

I then had to hold back a hiss of frustration. *No.*

I then covered my eyes with my paws, as if that would keep more of Breezepelt's convincing words from making their way into my head. *No. No. No. Goldenshine is right. Move on and stay away.*

I then rolled over onto my side, blinking my eyes as fatigue managed to take over despite my racing thoughts. *That's just how tired I am, I suppose.*

Unfortunately, I had hardly gotten *any* sleep over the last few nights. And even more unfortunately, it was *completely* my choice. But I had found that I would rather be tired than deal with *any more* of the nightmares I was having. *And maybe the nightmares will realize it's no use if I wait long enough.*

I then snorted to myself. *Even I realize how stupid that sounds... but what can I do?*

I then pulled myself out of my thoughts as I once again saw motion at the entrance of the warriors den, and I excitedly shifted my head, hoping to see Cherryfall walk through.

But I let out a quiet sigh as Lightningstrike walked through instead. *Not that there's anything wrong with him... but I miss Cherryfall.*

The black tom with white paws treaded quietly through the den, which had now quieted down as several cats settled down for the night, trying to shut out the rain. As he passed me, he saw that I was awake and flashed me a friendly look before continuing on.

He now was making his way past Snowstorm's nest, which was right next to mine and Cherryfall's. My best friend was tightly curled up, sleeping heavily as she always did.

It was *dark* in this den – our whole *camp* was dark, even during the day, so I was not surprised at all when Lightningstrike accidentally stepped on one of Snowstorm's paws during his travel.

He let out a quiet gasp, his yellow eyes bright and wide even through the darkness. But I almost had to hold back a purr when he looked down, suddenly looking utterly *mortified* when he realized it was Snowstorm he had stepped on.

He practically looked as if he had committed *murder* as he then saw that she was waking up. "Oh my gosh, Snowstorm, I am *so* sorry!" he meowed to the white she-cat in an alarmed whisper.

Snowstorm stirred, blinking groggily until her eyes fell on the tom. "Lightningstrike?" she then murmured.

"Yes, it's me, and I accidentally stepped on your paw and woke you up." I then watched as my kin sighed and slapped his tail over his face. "I should have been watching my paws with how dark it is in here. I'm so, so sorry."

Snowstorm seemed amused by the tom's humiliation, shifting and fully lifting up her head. "That's okay, Lightningstrike! Stop covering your face, you're fine," she then whispered.

She then purred and watched as the tom slowly and shyly let his

tail slide away from his eyes, revealing a worried, shy gaze. "Did I hurt your paw?" he then asked.

"Not at all," Snowstorm then answered. She then nodded down to her nest. "I'm surprised I even woke up, honestly. That soft moss you gave me is *so* comfortable that I'm out cold immediately as soon as I lay down."

She then looked back up at the tom, her blue eyes warm. "Thanks again for it."

Lightningstrike's ears flicked, and he then shyly looked down at his paws. "It was no problem, Snowstorm. I was more than glad to give you some," he whispered. "I feel like I should give you some more to make it up to you."

Snowstorm let out another quiet purr. "No need."

The tom then lifted his head, his eyes full of worry once again. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"*More* than okay, Lightningstrike," Snowstorm then answered as she stared back at the tom reassuringly. "Don't worry about it."

"Alright," Lightningstrike replied with a sigh. He then flashed Snowstorm a warm look as he slowly began to pad ahead. "At least I can rest assured that it won't take you long to go back to sleep!"

Snowstorm let out another quiet purr. "Exactly." I then raised my eyebrows as my friend gave Lightningstrike a light flick on the ear. "Goodnight, Lightningstrike."

As I had expected, Lightningstrike slowed down in his tracks, his yellow eyes gleaming in the darkness as he looked back at my friend. "Goodnight, Snowstorm," he then meowed warmly, his eyes resting on her for another heartbeat before making his way – more carefully now – towards his own nest.

Snowstorm seemed to watch him for a moment before letting out a sigh, setting her head back down in her nest and closing her eyes.

And here I was just a couple of tail-lengths away, shaking my head

in amazement. *Great StarClan, how did Snowstorm wait moons for me to figure out how I felt about Cherryfall?* I thought. *I hate how desperately that I want to see how this plays out.*

I then quickly moved my gaze right back to the den entrance as I saw movement once again, and this time, I was overwhelmed with relief. *Speaking of Cherryfall...*

My mate was walking through the entrance this time, and I immediately sat up as I met her sweet amber gaze. "There you are!" I whispered, a purr rising in my throat as Cherryfall gently trotted forward and pressed her muzzle to mine. "I was getting nervous."

Cherryfall then pulled away, revealing her brown eyes full of affection and worry. "You were nervous? I didn't want to make you nervous!"

I sniffed, brushing my tail along Cherryfall's flank. "It's alright. It's because I love you."

"Aw, I love you too," Cherryfall purred quietly before lying down in our nest beside me, and I watched her, overwhelmed with affection as I watched her adjust the buttercups I'd set for her. "Emberheart, Molewhisker and I were collecting sticks to fix up the apprentices den, and then it started to rain," she then began to explain. "We probably would have been back much earlier, but we hadn't collected *nearly* enough yet, and Emberheart and I were determined to finish the job."

I then stared wide-eyed at my mate. "So you collected sticks *in the rain*?"

Cherryfall nodded enthusiastically at me. "We did!"

I sighed, shaking my head. "You amaze me every day, Cherryfall."

"I try," the ginger she-cat purred, and after we exchanged a glance, she went on. "Molewhisker probably hates our guts now, but as his sister, he'll have to at least forgive *me* eventually."

"He'd better!" I whispered in reply. I then looked at my mate up and down. "Wait, how are you dry?"

Cherryfall gave a shrug. "Oh, I just shook out my fur a few times before coming in here – that's why I was *extra* delayed!"

I gave Cherryfall a teasing look. "You know I'd still like you if your fur was wet."

"I know!" she purred, giving me a light nudge. "But I also would rather snuggle up to you with dry fur."

I let out another purr, wrapping my tail around Cherryfall's back and pulling her closer. "Do it, then." I watched as Cherryfall then purred, pressing her fur into mine as she lied her head on my shoulder. "So, guess what?"

Cherryfall then immediately lifted up her head, meeting my gaze. "Oh my gosh, what?"

I nodded towards my mother and Dustystorm's nest. "So, remember the other day when Goldenshine was acting really strange?"

Cherryfall gave me an inquisitive look. "You're going to have to majorly narrow it down, my love."

I gave a purr and rolled my eyes. "Remember when Goldenshine seemed to be in a really bad mood the other night? She told us Breezepelt was bothering her, but she seemed irritated with Dustystorm too."

"That's right!" Cherryfall exclaimed quietly. Her eyes then filled with worry. "You worried they were fighting..."

Her eyes then widened as I gave a nod. "They *were* fighting?"

"Fighting, or..." I then sniffed. "Goldenshine giving Dustystorm the silent treatment for a few days..."

"No surprise there!" Cherryfall cheerfully replied. She then narrowed her eyes. "And we wondered if it was about Breezepelt..."

My mate looked bewildered once again as I sighed, looking away from her for a moment. "It *was* about Breezepelt?"

"I wish I could say no," I then breathed, my brain feeling almost physically heavy whenever Breezepelt's name circulated in it. *It's already circulated too much today.*

"Wow..." Cherryfall then whispered, her amber gaze thoughtful as she stared ahead. "Thank goodness they got through that."

I then forced myself to give a sharp nod. "Yes, and now Breezepelt won't mess with any of us again." I then couldn't help but shift uncomfortably in my spot. "At least, I hope."

Cherryfall looked back at me. "Yeah?"

"Yes."

"...Even after what he last said to you?"

"When I went to see him?" I tried to lash my tail dismissively. "Great StarClan, that mouse-brain was just trying to sweet talk. None... none of what he said was true."

I then took a deep breath, trying to be more confident in my words. "There is nothing but evil in that cat, and I don't want to even try and look beyond that." I then glanced back towards my mother's nest once again, and I was surprised by the bitterness that tempted to rear its ugly head. "And anyway... Goldenshine wants us both to stay away. She's made that very clear."

Cherryfall's eyes then darkened as she also looked at her former mentor for a moment. "Yeah... she has, hasn't she?" My mate then looked back at me, and I was surprised to see her amber eyes fill with worry as I let out a yawn. "Goodness gracious, Swiftflight, you look so tired."

I snorted at the she-cat's comment. "Gee, thanks."

"Oh, don't worry," Cherryfall then whispered, giving me a teasing nudge. "I'm into this rugged, tired look."

I let out a quiet purr. "I'm flattered."

"But I'm being serious," Cherryfall then meowed calmly. And after

searching my gaze for a moment, she laid her tail comfortingly on my shoulder. "How are the nightmares?"

I closed my eyes for a moment, weirdly relieved to be talking about this as opposed to Breezepelt. "If I'm being honest? Dreadful. I..." I then gave a sheepish shrug as I vented my frustrations out loud. "I definitely try to avoid them sometimes."

My mate sighed and closed her eyes. "Swiftflight, how I despise that."

I grabbed Cherryfall's tail with my own, hating seeing her upset as I gave her a reassuring look. "Don't worry, I..." I then sighed, forcing myself to say this next part out loud and make it real. "I really am going to try and get a full night's sleep tonight. And along with that..."

I then looked outside beyond the warriors den. "I'm going to talk to Jayfeather about these nightmares as soon as I can. But..." I then let out a frustrated huff. "With the flooding and adjusting to this camp and patrols... and *Breezepelt*... I haven't had much of a chance yet."

I then flicked my ears, my gaze shifting towards Lilypetal and Thornclaw's nest, where the ThunderClan deputy seemed to be shifting uncomfortably in her sleep. *Like I will be soon...* I thought worriedly. *I want to talk to her too about all of this, but that's been just as difficult.*

I then looked back at Cherryfall as she spoke. "I totally get that," she whispered as she then snuggled closer to me. "In the meantime, you can just hold on to me while you have your nightmares."

I stared softly at her, tightening my grip on her tail. "That sounds good to me," I purred. "I'm really going to try and push through this time, and then hopefully figure all of this nightmare nonsense out."

"You absolutely will," Cherryfall purred back. The two of us then shared a warm look, and I was curious when the she-cat's look grew thoughtful again. And after a moment, she then whispered, "...What about the Breezepelt nonsense?"

I was so caught off guard that I completely loosened my grip on my mate's tail. "What about Breezepelt?"

"What are you going to do about that?"

"I'm going to do something?"

"You're *not* going to do something?"

I stared wide-eyed back at my mate. "What in the name of StarClan are you talking about? I haven't said *anything* that implies that. And if I have, I'm concerned."

"Why would you need to be concerned about that?" Cherryfall pressed me.

My head was already spinning again, and I gave my mate a hard look. "Cherryfall, I cannot take a chance on trusting that tom. I would be an absolute idiot if I did."

"Swiftflight, you would not."

"I would!" I retorted quietly, checking briefly to see if any cat was stirring in response to our conversation.

I then looked back at Cherryfall as I felt my heart flutter with panic. "And can you imagine how hurt and betrayed Goldenshine would be if I spoke with him again? She'd think..."

I then shook my head, as if to shake my own worried thoughts away. "It's too risky, Cherryfall. I've taken lots of chances in my life, and this one just isn't worth taking."

I then looked away from my mate, trying to force down the guilt that had been welling up this whole time. "He's not going to change, anyway. How could I believe that?"

I then looked back at Cherryfall almost *pleadingly*, hoping that she would just believe what I was saying and move on.

But my mate was smarter than that, and instead, she simply stared at me sympathetically for a moment. "Swiftflight, I understand your

wariness. I really, really do. But..."

I then watched curiously as she scanned her gaze around the warriors den, almost *frantically*. "Um..." she then murmured.

I stared at her worriedly. "What?"

"I..." She then scanned the den one more time before proceeding to stand up. "Hold on, let's talk out in the clearing."

"What?" I asked, completely bewildered as I stood up with her. "Why?"

My mate then crawled quietly though the den entrance, and I was right behind her. "I feel weird talking about this cat while being in the same den as she is."

"*What?*" I pressed a little more loudly now that the rest of our Clanmates weren't in earshot. "Who in the name of StarClan are we talking about?"

Cherryfall then came to a stop near the corner of camp, fairly far away from the warriors den. And despite how concerned and nervous I was at the moment for the conversation that was about to come, I was taken as the moonlight from outside splashed onto Cherryfall's fur and highlighted her pensive look. *Absolutely beautiful, even when she's making me want to rake my claws against the wall with anxiety.*

I then shook my head, bringing myself to focus as she answered me. "We're talking about your favorite cat – my mother," her tone pointed but even.

My eyes widened as I sat next to the she-cat. "Why was that so sarcastic? I like your mother!"

Cherryfall then tilted her head at me, cocking one of her eyebrows. "But it took you a while to get there."

"Well, yeah!" I replied quickly, my distress at the time almost seeming to come back as I looked back on that horrible time. "She was determined to dislike me because she didn't trust-"

I cut myself off – the meaning behind Cherryfall's words seeming to physically strike me before I'd even finished speaking.

I narrowed my eyes and simply gave my mate a mockingly contemptuous look. "Mm."

Cherryfall gave me a small nod, looking satisfied before she replied. "Swiftflight, I know that I don't need to explain to you just how closed-minded Poppyfrost was," she meowed, sighing. "She had her reasons, sure, but I will *always* stand by the fact that she took way too long to hear you out."

Guilt seemed to nudge me once again, but for a different reason this time. "It also took me a bit to encourage her to hear me out..." I admitted, giving my mate an apologetic glance. "And... I did have a past. As mad as I was at her, I get it." *I can't believe that I'm saying that...*

"A past that you had *long* put behind you," Cherryfall then insisted. "You literally were trying to fix things the *morning after* Snowstorm pulled you out of the Dark Forest. Some maybe thought it was abrupt, but it was genuine. And you knew that your Clanmates probably wouldn't believe you at first."

I had to hold back a frustrated hiss knowing that *someone* had already tried reminding me about my own past already. *It's much more welcome from Cherryfall though*. "I guess," I then replied. I then sat up straighter, trying to sound firmer. "But not every situation is the same, Cherryfall. Some cats have made bigger mistakes, and some may try to 'prove themselves' for the wrong reasons."

"And you're *certain* that Breezepelt is doing it for the wrong reasons?" Cherryfall pressed to me. When I simply sighed with frustration, not wanting to answer that question, my mate went on. "Imagine if Poppyfrost had never given in to you, Swiftflight."

That thought made it feel as if the tunnel floor had collapsed under me, and it brought me to wrap my tail around Cherryfall's back. "I don't even want to imagine. And..."

I started to shake my head in amazement as everything Cherryfall

had told me so far continued to sink in. "I never would have imagined that you would compare me to *Poppyfrost*, of all cats. I..."

I then gave a sigh of defeat. "I really do get what you're saying though," I admitted, as much as I *hated* to. "I'm shutting Breezepelt out like she did with me, right?"

"Sure, but that's not all," Cherryfall replied, to my surprise, pensive as she looked at me up and down. "I'm actually seeing more and more how similar you two are as cats."

As one would expect, that shocked me. "*Really?*" I quietly exclaimed.

"Swiftflight, because of the work you did to prove yourself, me and everyone else know you as a tom that is kind, thoughtful, smart, and so, so loyal and protective of those he loves," my mate answered.

She hadn't even finished yet, but I already knew exactly where she was going, and I was already bracing having to face it head-on. "But like my mother," Cherryfall continued, "you are just *that* loyal and protective that I think you are shielding your *own* feelings to spare those you love."

There it was. I'd almost hoped I'd take that fact to my burial spot, but here we were.

After a few moments, I closed my eyes and let out a heavy sigh. "I can't agree with my mother and want to stay away from Breezepelt because *I* want to?" I forced out pitifully.

"You absolutely can," Cherryfall insisted genuinely. "But I can tell that you don't want to."

Then, as if she sensed that I was currently having an internal battle with myself, she took my tail and twinned it with her own. "And you don't have to."

"I wish it were that easy, Cherryfall. But I..." I then trailed off as my conversations with Breezepelt echoed in my head once again – how he told me about his efforts at redemption, how he was going to try

despite cats not trusting him at first, how he was going to attempt to make irredeemable acts redeemable, how... how my words to him during the Dark Forest battle had made a difference...

Cherryfall was right.

But there was something in my way. "But I..." I then continued as I filled up with fear. "I can't even fathom what would happen if I revealed to Goldenshine that I... I..."

I could hardly say it out loud. I then gave Cherryfall a worried look. "What if she hated me?"

"That's not possible, Swiftflight!" my mate insisted.

"Well, if anything, she'd probably never trust me again," I found myself spilling out as I shook my head helplessly. "I feel like I haven't even had her trust for that long after everything I've done."

I then shut my eyes for a moment as guilt overwhelmed me once again. "I completely threw away our relationship when I was an apprentice, and I'm *still* surprised she forgave me after how despicable I was to her. I thank StarClan every day for that. But... what would happen now?" I then gave my mate an utterly troubled look. "Cherryfall, if I take a chance on Breezepelt, Goldenshine turns on me, and then I'm *wrong*, I... I don't know what I would do."

Cherryfall's certain gaze didn't falter as she looked back at me and tightened her grip on my tail. "Swiftflight, you would stand by the fact that you are a grown cat that made his *own choice*, that's what. And if Goldenshine thinks you are betraying her by doing that, then... *wow*." I managed to let out the smallest purr before the ginger she-cat went on. "Listen, I don't know Goldenshine quite as well as you do, but I know her really well. Maybe she'd shut you out for a few days like she did with Dustystorm, but I don't think she would ever, *ever* turn on you just because you followed your heart."

I simply stared back at Cherryfall for a few moments, wishing more than anything that these words from the cat I trusted more than most anyone else were true. "I really, really want to believe that," I

then said out loud.

A chill then ran down my spine as I looked ahead. "...I'm scared that my heart will be wrong though."

"I'd argue that it rarely is," Cherryfall told me softly, and when I looked back at her, she gave me a wink. "But you won't know for sure unless you try."

Truthfully, those words filled me with more fear than I'd felt in a very, very long time.

But I managed to take a deep breath, letting myself stare adoringly at Cherryfall for a moment before purring. "So, let me guess..." I then murmured. "These were the thoughts you had out in the forest that one day, huh?"

Cherryfall tilted her head, giving the most adorable shrug. "Possibly."

"Well, Snowstorm is right," I then purred, "you do have good thoughts."

Cherryfall gasped, pretending to be offended. "Did you doubt it before?"

"Nope. You just reinforced it. And..." I took another breath, now getting lost in Cherryfall's amber eyes. "you reminded me just how happy I am to have you by my side through all of this. I also thank StarClan every day that Poppyfrost let you." *And... maybe others deserve that chance too...*

I almost had to hold back an exasperated groan. *Wow, I am scared. Really scared.*

But once again, I sought comfort in Cherryfall's big, sparkling eyes, and her sweet voice. "I do too," she meowed softly. "And I thank StarClan every day that they gave me the most selfless and big-hearted tom in this Clan to love."

I stared at Cherryfall with a tender gaze. *That's one of the most surreal things I could hear...* "Thanks," I purred simply.

Practically overwhelmed with affection and love, I dug my muzzle into my mate's neck as a purr seemed to rise in her throat. And honestly, I have no idea how long we were there like that, quietly purring and drinking in each other's scents before we both abruptly pulled away from each other, startled by the sound of an owl crying out from the forest.

Cherryfall pulled away, giving me a teasing look. "Hm, I think he's telling you that it's time to get some sleep!"

The two of us then shared a purr as we began to walk back to the den. "Oh, I guess I'll listen. Cherryfall?" My mate looked at me, her eyes still sparkling. "Thank you for being honest with me. I... I understand why you'd be reluctant to share all of that with me at first, but I'm glad you did."

Cherryfall then touched her muzzle to mine as we stopped at our nest. "Always, Swiftflight." The two of us then settled down, and the she-cat immediately seemed to notice when the nerves of what tonight might hold suddenly hit me. "You've got this, okay?" she then whispered to me. "Hold me as tightly as you need to."

I stared at her, overwhelmed with love. "I will."

I then snuggled up to Cherryfall, wrapping my tail around her flank. "Already on it."

And with that, I finally shut my eyes, trying to focus on my mate's sweet scent as decided to let my drowsiness take over. It was easier that I'd thought, considering my heart still seemed to be *racing* at the thought of what I might do in the future. *Might? Will, Swiftflight.*

I then couldn't help but let out a sigh. *Great StarClan, having emotions is hard.*

I then sunk down deeper into my nest as sleep was quickly taking over – it had waited for a while to do so.

And it seemed to creep up like I was a piece of prey being hunted.

StarClan help me, I was so tired of being scared like this.

Suddenly, the dark came fast.

And there I was, standing amongst the darkness. The ground beneath me wasn't forest floor, but it felt wrong all the same, like it was *breathing*, almost. Every step dragged, sticky and heavy, and when I tried to pull free, it clung harder, swallowing my paws up and trying to pull me under. The air was thick, pressing in on my ears and my chest.

I thought I was already done for, but then I saw *them*.

Those bright blue, menacing stupid eyes.

They hovered just beyond the shadows, fixed on me with a horrible sort of patience. Like they already *knew* how this was supposed to end.

You're tired, a voice whispered, not in my ears but inside of my *skull*. *You don't have to fight anymore.*

I backed up, heart pounding in my ears. "Yeah, no," I snapped, because apparently sarcasm was my last defense. "Hard pass."

The shadows shifted. The eyes moved closer.

You belong here, the voice said softly now. *You've already walked this path.*

All of my fear turned into complete rage for a moment. "And I will never walk it again!" I yowled as wind suddenly roared around me. "You could never, ever bring me back!"

Almost as if it were responding to my retort, the ground suddenly yanked me down without warning. Darkness wrapped around my legs, my belly, my throat.

I couldn't breathe.

And the eyes filled my vision, burning brighter, more evil, and drilling into me like they were trying to hollow me out and pour something else in.

Come join us, Swiftflight. You will prosper like you never have before.

That did it.

I managed to tear myself awake with a sharp gasp, claws digging into my nest like it was the only thing keeping me in this world. My heart was racing so hard now that it *hurt*.

For a moment, I didn't know where I was, only that the dark was still too close, still pressing in.

But thank StarClan, then I felt Cherryfall.

She shifted in her sleep next to me, but I thankfully hadn't woken her up. I let out a sigh and pressed even closer to her, burying my face in her fur like a kit and not caring even a little how pathetic that might've looked.

But the nightmare lingered, clinging to my thoughts no matter how hard I tried to shake it. My paws were still trembling.

I needed to talk to Jayfeather. *Needed* needed.

But the tunnel clearing was still pitch black – there was no way I was going to wake him up now. *And I have a full day of patrols tomorrow. Shoot*, I then thought, almost having to suppress a frustrated growl.

I exhaled slowly, staring into the shadows of the den and wishing, not for the first time, that desperation counted as a valid excuse.

I'd find a time. Now, I was certain that I had to.

When? I wasn't sure. But now I guess I would lie awake and celebrate the fact that there were now *two* very pivotal, very distressing conversations in my life that needed to be had.

Chapter 23

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

The Gathering island appeared in pieces.

The full moon came first. Then the grass, shrubs, and water on all sides. Then the overwhelming smell of stenches from four different Clans.

I wasn't fully *in* it at first. I was watching myself from somewhere just behind my own eyes, like I'd taken half a step out of my body. I saw my own paws standing in the middle of the clearing, claws unsheathed, fur bristling. I looked steadier than I remembered feeling...

Because I had literally just tackled Ashfur to the ground and had revealed to all four Clans that he wasn't the tom that anyone thought he was. At the time, it had been the scariest, riskiest thing I had ever done.

I mean, considering what it brought me later, maybe it still was.

My heart had been pounding like it never had before when Firestar's voice cut through the clearing. "Ashfur, I am sorry to say it, but if you are admitting to what you have done, and it is true," he growled, trying to stay calm, "Then you can no longer be in ThunderClan."

I watched Ashfur's blue eyes widen. He didn't say anything, which was almost as ominous as any retort.

Firestar didn't look away from the gray-speckled tom. "Tomorrow at sunrise if you are caught in ThunderClan's territory, you will be treated as any intruder."

"Fine!" Ashfur then barked.

As the tom yelled those words, I felt that beautiful feeling again – absolute gosh darn *triumph.* It threw me off almost as I watched myself standing there, my hazel eyes blazing with determination.

And to be honest, at first, I had no idea why I was being shown such a glorious moment considering my track record of nightmares.

But then Ashfur's eyes locked onto mine, and everything else dropped away.

And suddenly, I was shown something that *already* haunted me every single day.

And it was in this moment that I realized that this was in fact still a nightmare, and it was going to be just as horrible as any of the others.

That was the moment. That *stare*.

That completely evil, insane look full of anger and contempt. I'd seen the need for vengeance there at the time, but I'd had absolutely no idea of the torment that this tom was going to bring me later on.

Ashfur then leapt onto the fallen tree and crossed it, his movements quick and sure. I couldn't look away. I didn't then, and I couldn't now. When he reached the other side, he glanced back, just once, and the look he gave me burned itself deeper into my mind than anything else that night.

Then he ran into the forest.

Firestar stared at the ground, shaking his head, before lifting his voice again.
"This Gathering is over!"

I stayed frozen, just like I had that night, staring at the place where Ashfur had disappeared. Watching myself realize it all over again.

I've made an enemy out of him tonight. And he'd make me regret it.

The island then darkened around me, shadows stretching too long,

swallowing the edges of the clearing. Ashfur's gaze stayed there, hovering in the dark, like it had never really left.

And when I already felt defeated just by that stare, Snowflight was suddenly at my paws.

I stumbled back, heart slamming into my ribs. *Oh, no. Snowflight. Not this again...*

Snowflight didn't move, and only lied unmoving below me. Her fur was matted with blood, her chest still, and the sight of her hit me all at once. I wanted to let out a cry of complete agony.

Mistpelt suddenly stood where Firestar had been, her fur drenched as she shivered. She didn't speak. She didn't have to. The look in her eyes was enough.

The clearing lurched again.

Thornclaw was on the fallen tree now, claws skidding on the bark as he struggled to keep his footing. Dark shapes moved below him in the water, just out of sight. He glanced back at me once, eyes wide, and I knew he was about to fall.

Goldenshine was next, pinned beneath a heavy bramble branch, teeth bared as she fought to shove it off her chest. Her breath came fast and ragged, panic flashing in her eyes when she realized I was watching and not moving.

Swiftflight stood near the edge of the island, paws dug into the dirt as if something was trying to drag him backward into the shadows. His fur was puffed, ears flat, eyes locked on me, silently begging me to do something.

Lightningstrike and Emberheart were tangled together nearby, both bleeding, both still trying to get to their paws even as the ground beneath them cracked and gave way. Wrenfeather hovered at the edge of it all, limping badly, one wing of pain pulling him sideways every time he tried to move closer to the others.

I had no idea who to help first.

And I couldn't move at all.

Ashfur's presence pressed in from every direction, that same cold, furious stare taking over the clearing.

I had seen the anger in it that night. I had thought I understood it.

I had *not*.

The shadows all around me suddenly rushed forward all at once, swallowing the clearing, the lake, all of their helpless faces. That furious stare burned into me as everything went dark...

And I then jerked awake with a sharp gasp, lungs burning almost like I'd been underwater. My claws tore into my nest before I realized where I was, heart slamming so hard it hurt. The den was dark and quiet, but the images clung to me anyway, flashing behind my eyes no matter how hard I squeezed them shut.

It took several shaky breaths before I could convince myself I wasn't on the island anymore.

Great StarClan, I was shocked that I hadn't woken up *yowling* after a nightmare like that.

But I was *shaking*, that was for sure. Goodness, I was shaking so hard that I almost wondering if my limbs were going to start falling off. And my heart still roared in my ears.

For a moment, I almost wanted to purr with amusement thinking that most of my Clanmates were sleeping soundly around me while I simultaneously went *berserk* over this nightmare. I had absolutely no idea how they managed to get worse and more unsettling every single time.

I forced myself to lower my head back down, putting my paws over my ears and shutting my eyes as I tried to bring myself back down to earth, telling myself the thing I'd tried to tell myself every day. *He is gone, Lilypetal*, I told myself, trying to keep myself from growling out of frustration. *He is objectively gone and several cats watched him become gone. Not back to the Dark Forest, out of existence.*

I don't know how, but my heart seemed to beat faster, and I seemed to shake even harder as my breath quickened. *He. Is. Gone!* I then seemed to scream to myself in my own mind. *Why can't I just know that and accept that?*

I then tried to start taking deep breaths, but my goodness, was it hard from how terrified I was. *Why is this getting harder each time?*

I was still shaking as I had risen from my nest at dawn. And thank StarClan, despite how worried I was that he never wanted to look at me again, Thornclaw and I had slept in our nest together the night before. And to my surprise, when I had lied down about a mouse-length from him, he still had taken his tail and pulled me closer to him.

And honestly, through my nightmare, I was glad that he had been right next to me while I slept... *but, I don't feel like I deserve it. I'm shocked he wants anything to do with me right now...*

And that thought was also weighing me down as I got up this morning. Thornclaw unfortunately had not been next to me by the time I woke up. But I had assigned him to the dawn patrol anyway, and it was no surprise to me that he was already up and ready to go. *And plus, it makes things a little straightforward for me,* I thought nervously. *I wasn't sure if we were going to have our morning meal together...*

I did wonder if I needed it, though. Because it was today that I realized that how these nightmares were getting to me was getting harder to cover up.

I didn't even get to properly speak to Thornclaw as I sent the dawn patrol off, which this morning, consisted of Thornclaw, Swiftflight, Rosepetal and Cloudtail. I'd also said farewell to Bramblestar and Dovewing, who were planning to take Jessy, Minty and Frankie out to teach them how to hunt.

I could tell that Thornclaw had been hesitant to leave with the patrol, to my dismay. I should have expected it, but I could see that he knew something was up with me, his gaze nothing but searching as I tried to give the patrol their directions.

Even Swiftflight seemed worried, to make things worse.

But I gave my mate an urging look as he went off. Yes, I wanted to talk to him, but I didn't want to make a big deal out of things or take him away from his duties. But if Thornclaw was willing to, I had planned to talk to him after. I will have calmed down more by then.

Well, at least I had hoped.

Great StarClan, it almost felt like some other relentless entity had taken me over, because I was still shaky and my heart was still racing by the time the dawn patrol had gone on their way, and the way I felt almost seemed *relentless*.

And even when I tried to train Lilypaw after, which always brought me so much that I seemed to forget all of my worries, I felt disoriented and anxious the *entire time*. I still managed to watch Lilypaw's Back Kick and give her some tips, but I was somewhere else – my stomach was aching, my head was spinning, my heart was racing and my legs felt weak.

I'd wanted to teach Lilypaw more, but I didn't even have the gosh darn capacity. And I didn't want Lilypaw to see through my act, so I'd instead sent her to replace nests in the medicine den while I pelted to the corner of the cave to take some deep breaths.

The fact that I was having to do this almost made me want to spiral even more. *In and out, Lilypetal. In and out...* I tried to tell myself. *What the heck is wrong with me? Why can't I just calm down?*

The deep breaths truly had helped a bit, but I still felt trapped in my own head. And I was surprised that I hadn't fallen over with these silly quivering legs.

None of the nightmares I'd had before impacted me like this. It wasn't even the worst one I'd had! Of course they always messed with me, but it had never, ever taken me this long to try and ignore it and calm down.

But it didn't matter how long my head was choosing to mess with

me. As always, I had to push through. *You have to push through, Lilypetal*, I told myself as I took one last deep breath and turned my head towards the tunnel entrance. *You can do this.*

I then felt my breath begin to shorten again, causing my heart to race as I locked my eyes on said entrance. *Thornclaw, where are you?* I thought worriedly, manifesting *so* hard that my mate would walk through with the dawn patrol at any moment.

And goodness, maybe it worked, because it was just a few heartbeats later when I could just barely hear pawsteps coming from outside, which were soon followed by the silhouettes of several figures – Thornclaw included. And to my surprise, Bramblestar, Dovewing and the kittypets were returning with them as well.

The relief I felt only lasted a moment, and my heart sank as I quickly observed the worried looks on everyone's faces. *Oh, no... what curveball is being thrown at us now?*

My heart was in my ears once again, but I forced myself to take another deep breath as I approached both patrols. "Hey!" I called out to them, my voice surprisingly winded as I spoke. "Is everything okay?"

Bramblestar sighed and gave a shrug. "We are *here*, at least, but apparently ShadowClan is having some trouble," the ThunderClan leader explained. "Dovewing and I ran into Tawnypelt while we were teaching the kittypets. She told us that they've been dealing with some kittypets attacking their patrols."

My eyes widened, and the shock of that situation was almost a distraction from my still racing heart. "Kittypets have managed to attack ShadowClan patrols?"

Bramblestar flashed an apologetic glance towards Jessy, Minty and Frankie sheepishly. "Apparently. The lack of prey and the flooding isn't doing them any favors."

The dark tabby tom then gave a determined nod. "And I hate that this is happening."

I hated that it did, but these words made my heart sink. Knowing Bramblestar, knowing ThunderClan... and *myself* on pretty much any other day, I knew exactly where this was going.

And I wasn't even sure if I had the capacity to think about it right now. "I want to help ShadowClan, if Rowanstar would allow it," Bramblestar went on, his amber eyes full of worry. "The fact that Tawnypelt came to tell us about it is enough for me to think that they need it. I..."

The leader then seemed distant for a moment as he looked down towards his paws. I found that I also was focusing on his paws in order to try and think about *anything* else. "I think I need to talk it over with some cats first, and you and I can chat about it too, Lilypetal. But either way, I think we should prepare for a battle soon."

Freaking frogs frolicking frantically over a fence, prepare for a battle?

Someone might as well have yanked the ground out from under me by the way my breath seemed to hitch, and it was getting harder to cover how much my legs were shaking. *Lilypetal, this is your own body and your own head, so why can't you freaking control it?*

I almost thought my feigned eager nod would tip me over as I acknowledged Bramblestar. "Yes, t-that sounds good!"

My voice had quivered and cracked as I'd spoken, but my leader was so deep in thought that he didn't notice. *And I'm praying to StarClan no one else does...* I thought. *Well...*

I flicked my gaze to the side for a moment, and sure enough, I could just barely catch a certain pale blue gaze on me. *That's a given,* I realized, wanting to pelt towards Thornclaw more than anything right now. *Stay strong. Listening to my leader shouldn't have to be this hard!*

I felt like there were rocks in my stomach, and I was struggling to take full breaths as I waited for Bramblestar to give directions. "I think you should start by checking in with Jayfeather to see if he has all of the herbs he needs to check battle wounds, and if not,

could you send a couple of cats out to collect them?"

My breath continued to quicken, and I was feeling a horrible mix of confusion and fear as my head seemed to become a strange *fog*. I could still see and hear everything, yet I still felt distant and detached as my brain seemed to feel *hollow*.

I couldn't imagine that I looked calm or normal to anyone at this point.

"And I'll probably have you come with me to speak with Rowanstar to ask if he wants our help," Bramblestar was going on, but I barely processed the words. "And if he does, we need to be ready to do so as soon as possible."

"Yeah!" I forced out once I thought the leader was finished. I then shifted in my spot, hoping that somehow moving would loosen up my legs, or loosen *me* up. I was spiraling more and more with each heartbeat.

And unfortunately, everything I was hearing right now was only a stressor.

And moving around didn't work. At this point, it felt like nothing could calm me down. *But why?*

I wasn't even thinking straight at this point, my panic making me feel helpless and bringing me to slowly start *backing away* as I gave a shake of my head. "Yes, Bramblestar, that all sounds fine-"

I then thought I could hear Thornclaw speak. "Lilypetal," he called out to me worriedly.

I couldn't even believe it, but Bramblestar was still too preoccupied to notice anything. "If you could also lead a patrol to find where these kittypets are coming from, that might be helpful." The leader then gave a confident nod. "If Rowanstar is unwilling to accept our help, we may take matters into our own paws."

At this point, I couldn't even answer anymore.

My chest felt tight, like something heavy was sitting on it, pressing

down harder every time I tried to breathe. I tried to suck in air anyway, shallow and fast, and my paws were still shifting beneath me like the ground was wobbly and soft.

"Lilypetal?" Thornclaw's voice came again, and he shouldered through the patrols until he was standing right in front of me. "Are you alright?"

My breath hitched again. Heat seemed to crawl up my neck and into my ears, and suddenly I was very aware of the way my fur probably looked, and how wild and frantic my eyes were.

I could feel cats staring now. I didn't have to *look* to notice.

I could just barely notice Swiftflight padding up to me as well, concern darkening his gray-blue gaze. "Lilypetal, what's wrong?"

Another cat asked something, I *think*. Then another. But I couldn't tell who was speaking anymore. The words blurred together now, piling on top of each other until it was all just overstimulating noise.

My heart continued to race, pounding so hard that it felt like it was trying to escape out of my chest.

I tried to drag in another breath, and another, but it truly didn't feel like they were going anywhere.

My paws tingled, my legs still felt weak, like they might actually *give out* at this point.

I wanted to reassure everyone that I was fine, but I was already too far gone.

Well, that's that. I am screwed.

I couldn't believe that I had everyone doting on me like this. I couldn't *believe* that I looked like this in front of them.

And especially, I couldn't believe that ThunderClan had a deputy as despicable as this one.

At this point, there was only one thing I felt I could do.

Run.

Chapter 24

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Suddenly, all I could see was the light leaking out from the camp entrance as I swerved past the crowd, and I felt all of their eyes on me and I ran at full speed out of the tunnels.

Were they calling out to me? I honestly wasn't sure. All I could hear was my own heart pounding in my ears.

The sun nearly blinded me as I made it out into the forest. And for a while, all I could do was continue to run, almost hoping that they farther I went, the more than my episode in front of everyone would just disappear from their memory.

And I honestly had no idea if I was still in ThunderClan territory by the time I skidded to a stop, almost tripping on a tree root and tumbling to the ground.

My heart seemed to stop as I came to a stop. I couldn't run anymore now – the running was taking my breath way even more than it was already gone.

I could hardly inhale. *Oh my StarClan, I can't breathe.*

This thought nearly made me want to topple over, and for a moment, I felt like I was going to pass out. *I can't breathe!*

The forest then seemed to disappear around me – sound and sight – as I simply sat down, trying to take short, shallow breaths despite it feeling like my lungs had *closed. Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh...*

It was all only getting worse. *What is happening to me?* My chest now felt tight, and seemed to be closing in. It almost felt like my heart couldn't fit anymore, and now, it was going to have no choice

but to shut down. *Am I dying?*

I then did the most violent flinch, letting out a startled cry as I then felt something touch me and brush against my back.

And I barely even has room to feel relief as Thornclaw's scent flooded through my nose, and I could just barely see his piercing blue eyes burning into me as I gasped. "Lilypetal, I'm here," he then meowed softly to me. "Breathe."

I continued to gasp for breath, each exhale coming out in a panicked cry. "Thornclaw, I-I think I'm dying. I-"

My mate's eyes were fixed on me as if his own life depended on it. "Lilypetal, you are not dying, I promise," he then told me, his voice gentler than I'd ever heard it in my life. "Just keep breathing."

"I-I *can't* breathe!"

"Yes, you can." The golden brown tabby then tightly twinned his tail with mine. I squeezed it tightly, trying to focus on my mate's touch and on his eyes. "You're breathing right now."

Despite Thornclaw's support and comforting words, everything still felt like a fog around me, like I wasn't completely here. "It doesn't feel like it!" I then cried out. "It's not working! My-my chest is..."

"You're talking, Lilypetal. You can breathe, I promise. You've done it your whole life." Thornclaw's eyes were still fixed on me as he took a step closer. "Please try, Lilypetal. Take a deep breath in..."

My head was still telling me that it was impossible, but I tried to push past it and attempt a weak inhale.

Thornclaw gave a soft nod to me. "Breath out..."

I managed to do so, but the breath was short. I tried not to let that scare me into an even deeper spiral and squeezed Thornclaw's tail even tighter. "Sorry," I gasped to my mate, worried that I was hurting him.

"Don't worry about it, Lilypetal," my mate then meowed. "Try

another deep breath." This breath felt just as difficult as the last one, but I pushed through. "That's it..." Thornclaw murmured. after another exhale. "That's it!"

I then closed my eyes, my heart still racing and my chest tight, but I was clinging onto the tom's words with all of my might.

"In... and out... in... and out. Try to slow them down... keep going... Lilypetal, you're amazing. *Please* keep going."

As I stared down at my paws, trying to ground myself and concentrate, I felt Thornclaw's warm breath on my head. "You are doing so well, Lilypetal. Really."

I still felt shorter of breath than I had in my entire life, but after what felt like eternity, it felt like my lungs had opened up again (as if they were ever closed) and my breathing was beginning to slow down and deepen. "Thank... thank you," I breathed out.

I then once again tried to ground myself with another attempted deep breath. It worked. "Thank you," I then meowed quietly, the words coming out in a whimper as I slightly loosened my grip on my mate's tail, but still gripping it tightly.

Thornclaw's pale blue eyes were full of a mix of worry and ease as he continued to watch me. "Of course," he replied quietly. "What do you need from me right now?"

Now that I was beginning to come down to earth and my thoughts were very slowly becoming more rational, I had room to feel things that were not complete and utter panic, despite it still being pretty prominent.

And Thornclaw asking me that question nearly made me want to collapse to the ground with all of the guilt I felt, and the guilt that had been building up for so, so long now. "I need you!" I cried out, pressing my head into my mate's shoulder as I continued to whimper. "Thornclaw, I always, always need you and have always needed you. And..."

I found myself having to catch my breath again through my sobs.

"And I am absolutely *horrible* for ever making you feel like I didn't!"

The guilt managed to grow even more as Thornclaw then wrapped his tail around my back, pulling me closer. "Lilypetal, *shhhhhh*," he whispered to me gently. "It's alright."

"No, it isn't! It isn't at all!" I immediately retorted. "I should have never pushed you away like I did. I didn't want to, but I *did*. I..."

I continued to try and catch my breath as I then pulled away to meet my mate's gaze, but my meows still came out in gasping sobs. "I wanted to tell you every single detail of my nightmares – Ashfur, everything he took away, losing you and everyone I love..."

I then shook my head and closed my eyes for a moment, images from those StarClan-cursed nightmares haunting my thoughts. *Gosh, how did I ever manage to keep all of this in?* "I have wanted to confide in you about *everything* like I always do, but-but... but I-"

"Lilypetal, please," Thornclaw meowed to me, his pale blue gaze sincere, almost glowing with gentle amusement as I made such a fuss. "You don't need to explain."

"Yes, I do! You were right – you *are* right. I am not fine," I replied quickly, sounding frantic. "In fact, I am a complete *mess*."

"Lilypetal, you are not-"

"And I should have listened to you a *long* time ago when you tried to tell me that," I went on. "Instead I made you feel like I resented you just because you were doing exactly what you should have done and were being caring and perfect just like you always are. How stupid am I?"

Saying all of this out loud made it more real, almost as if someone else was describing all of the horrible things I had done *to me* for the first time, and I could hardly stand it. "Thornclaw, I am so, so, *so* sorry!"

Thornclaw simply pulled me back into his chest as I continued to whimper and sob. "Lilypetal, it is okay, and you are not stupid," he then whispered to me. "*Shhhh*, it really is okay."

I dug my muzzle back into his shoulder fur. "It really isn't."

"It is," he then purred to me softly.

"I don't know how you can say that."

"Maybe it'll surprise you to find that I find it quite easy."

"How? *How?*" I pressed to Thornclaw, in genuine disbelief as I pulled back to look into his eyes, all of my behavior in the last several days... several *moons* now replaying in my head. "Great StarClan, I'd already put you through enough *before* Ashfur was even dead, and somehow I manage to be even worse and even more stubborn *after* his sorry tail went away."

I then gave a shrug in amazement. "Seriously, how can you stand to be here with me right now?"

As pitiful of a question as it was – trust me, I know – I genuinely was baffled that this tom could even look at me in the eyes after everything I'd done.

So I continued to *be* baffled as Thornclaw continued to look back at me for a few moments, his eyes glowing.

Then, after another moment, he then meowed softly, "Because I love you."

With those words, I could simply stare back at my mate, overwhelmed as he continued to stare back at me tenderly. "Nothing you have done changes that, Lilypetal," he then meowed.

I began to shake my head weakly. "Thornclaw, are you sure you don't want to rethink that?" I asked him, my voice slowly becoming more even, thank StarClan.

"I'm sure," Thornclaw immediately replied, bringing me to purr in disbelief. He then gave a small shrug, looking away from me for a moment as his gaze darkened. "Yes, I did worry that you didn't need me, and I worried that you were pushing me away on purpose. I'd be lying if I said that didn't hurt."

I then closed my eyes for a moment, another surge of guilt and sadness overwhelming me. *Goodness gracious, I can hardly stand to hear that...*

But the tom's gaze quickly softened again as he leaned forward to rest his head against mine. "But I also know you, Lilypetal. I know you didn't do any of that for the sake of it."

I closed my eyes as I leaned deeper into my mate. "I still did it..." I replied, my voice small.

"But you were trying to carry everything by yourself again, like you did before Ashfur was dead. Even more now that you're deputy."

Of course, Thornclaw's thoughts were spot on, and that made me let out another small whimper as I screwed my eyes shut. "You were trying to hold it together so no one else had to worry," the tom went on. He then pulled back, meeting my gaze with warm pale blue eyes once again. "That's who you are. That's part of the reason *why* I love you."

I was baffled that my mate managed to turn one of my biggest flaws into one of my biggest attributes.

But nevertheless, I was overwhelmed by his sweet words. "I know, I know," I meowed, my voice cracking. I then felt my eyes fill with emotion again as I met his gaze. "But I *never* wanted to shut you out."

"I believe you. Completely," Thornclaw replied sincerely. I then blinked gratefully back at him as he then set one of his paws over mine. "Next time, you don't have to be strong for me. I can handle it. I *want* to handle it."

At this point, I could only nod, hardly being able to find the words to respond to just how wonderful this tom was that sat in front of me. "And when you're honest with me," he then continued, his gaze hardening, "you're going to have to deal with me telling you that you need to *take it easy*. I know that's another reason you wanted to not tell me things."

I then managed a small purr as Thornclaw winked at me. But after a moment, his gaze grew serious again. "Lilypetal, you are not weak for doing that, or taking breaks, and for acknowledging what you've gone through." I was nodding weakly as he spoke, still being too overwhelmed for words. "Okay?"

I then managed to give a sharper nod, and finally, I was able to speak. "Okay," I nearly whispered. I then found my breath quickening again as Thornclaw pulled me back into his embrace. "Okay," I then meowed as I whimpered into his shoulder. "I will rest. I really, really will."

"Thank StarClan."

"Thornclaw, I love you so, so much."

"I love you too, Lilypetal," Thornclaw purred. He then rested his muzzle on my head as I tried to take more deep breaths. "When we get back to camp, go straight to the warriors den and lay down. I'll grab us something to eat, if you want."

He then shifted so that he could meet my gaze intently. "Are you hungry?"

I gave a sigh, shaking my head softly in retort. "Thornclaw, you don't have-"

"Are you hungry?" my mate repeated, his voice firmer this time.

I managed to purr softly at the question, looking sheepishly back at my mate. "A little..."

Thornclaw flashed me a brief amused glance. "Okay, then I'll get us something to eat," he meowed, "and I'll tell Bramblestar that you need to take the day to rest. I'll check with Jayfeather and make sure he has battle herbs ready, and I'll see if the patrol Bramblestar wants you to lead can wait until tomorrow."

I was staring lovingly back at my mate, also in disbelief still as he listed everything off. "Does that sound alright to you?" he then asked me.

"Of course it doesn't," I meowed warmly to Thornclaw, my voice still thick with emotion. Thornclaw then purred softly as I murmured, "but that's just because I'm sitting back while you do things for me."

I then closed my eyes in bliss as Thornclaw nuzzled his nose gently against mine. "Well, it's one of my favorite things to do, so you'll just have to deal," he replied teasingly.

"I have a hard life," I purred, overwhelmed with affection as I pulled away and met my mate's gaze. "Thank you, Thornclaw." *I have been certain of this since our first hunting trip - great StarClan, you are incredible beyond words.*

Thornclaw's eyes sparkled as he looked back at me, and he still managed to make my stomach turn upside down, and make me feel like nothing else in the world mattered. "Always, Lilypetal," he then whispered.

He then tightened his grip on my tail, and it was in that moment that I realized that he had been holding it this whole time, almost from the moment he had gotten here. *As it should be.* "Are you okay?" the golden brown tabby then asked me worriedly. "How are you feeling now?"

Before answering, I let myself take another deep breath. And weirdly, it didn't take me long to consider my answer, my head feeling so clear now that I had managed to calm down. "I'm still shaken, and my heart's still pounding like I've run to the old territories and back but..."

Another deep breath, just to be sure. "I am okay," I then answered. "Weirdly..."

I then closed my eyes for a moment, and for the first time, I actually *welcomed* all of the thoughts that have terrified me for so long. Well, they're still terrifying, of course, but I tried not to shove them down ruthlessly.

Images of Ashfur – the pure evil in his eyes and the desire for vengeance that hardened his heart and dug his claws deep into the

ground as he wanted to shred everyone that was dear to me.

Images of everyone the cats I had lost to him – my dear Snowflight and my mother, Mistpelt. It would never be easy to think of them or how I lost them, especially when I still felt certain that they were gone too soon.

Images of those I *still* had, who, for moons, I had been terrified that I would also lose to Ashfur.

Images of that final confrontation with Ashfur on that birch tree above the raging river below.

Images of those sick, angry and bitter glances Ashfur gave to Squirrelflight before any of this had ever happened.

Images of that fire in the stone hollow, Lionblaze, Hollyleaf, Jayfeather and Squirrelflight looking astounded and terrified as they stared across the camp back at Ashfur, who threatened all of their lives.

Images and echoes of that Gathering on the island when I'd exposed who Ashfur really was.

And feelings of those moons... *seasons* of fear I had felt all because I had done that. All because of Ashfur's anger.

Feelings of frustration and utter terror about each time he'd managed to come back when I thought he'd been gone for good.

And just as Swiftflight had said not too long ago, as hard as it was to acknowledge, Ashfur still managed to come back, in a way. He was never truly going to leave us – his impact had been enough to stick with us *forever*.

He still had managed to drag me down during what should have been the most exciting time in my life – I was deputy of ThunderClan. I had been chosen to help lead my Clan, and while I would have questioned my abilities under *any* circumstances, all of the self-doubt I carried in the past *because* of Ashfur lingered. He'd felt too powerful. In a way, he *still* was powerful.

I could never deny that. And I wasn't going to try to anymore.

I took yet another deep breath. "Weirdly..." I then repeated, a rush of warmth running through my fur, bringing my shoulders to sink down and my whole body to relax. I then met Thornclaw's gaze, and from how relieved he looked, I couldn't even image the look I had in my eyes. "I feel like I'm better than I have been in a very, very long time."

I actually could hardly stand to look at the amount of love and relief that glowed in my mate's eyes. "Good," he then meowed gently as he ran his tail along my flank and gave me another wink. "I think you deserve that."

Thornclaw himself then took a deep breath as I let out a small purr. "Alright, I have another question for you," he then meowed, his voice a bit louder now.

I winked teasingly right back at him. "Sorry, I've limited questions to just one a day."

Thornclaw rolled his eyes. "You are so funny."

I purred, a full one this time, touching my muzzle to Thornclaw's as he pretended to look annoyed. "What is your question?" I then asked warmly.

I was then surprised to see Thornclaw's gaze wipe over with a bit of nerves, his teeth slightly bared as he looked past me for a moment. "How do you feel about other cats being here with you right now?"

I couldn't help but widen my eyes, that question slightly making my heart drop. "Why?" I pressed.

Thornclaw nervously looked past me once again, cringing sheepishly as his eyes glowed with both warmth and wariness. "Turn around?"

Oh, dear.

I flashed my mate a wary look as I began to turn my head.

But that wariness completely disappeared when I turned around, and my jaw seemed to drop all the way to the ground at what I saw there. *Oh my goodness...*

I was completely bewildered by all of the cats that were standing there. *All* of my kits – Goldenshine, Emberheart, Lightningstrike and Wrenfeather. *Oh, my kits...*

Swiftflight was also there, along with Lilypaw, Whitewing, Squirrelflight...

And even Brackenfur, Daisy...

And great StarClan, I couldn't believe it, but *Spiderleg* was here and standing next to his mate.

All of them – well, almost all of them – were looking tenderly back at me, greeting me with kind eyes as I turned around.

But there was a ripple of laughter as I gasped, feeling so embarrassed for a moment that I covered my eyes with my tail, purring uncomfortably as I felt Thornclaw wrap his tail around my back.

When I let myself take a peek, I could just barely see Goldenshine staring back at me, her demeanor almost perfectly reflecting the adorable, sheepish one that her father carried right before I'd turned around. "Surprise..." she then murmured as she gave a lash of her tail.

I let out an amused, overwhelmed sigh. "Oh my goodness, you all," I then meowed as I let my tail drop. "How long have you been standing there?"

My gaze then shifted to Emberheart as she gave a shy shrug. "We've trickled in..." she admitted, bringing everyone to purr once again. But her gaze brightened as she then flicked her tail over to her side. "But Goldenshine, Lightningstrike, Wrenfeather, Swiftflight and I were here first!"

My heart then wanted to sink when I met Wrenfeather's worried pale blue eyes. "I had just come out of the warriors den and I saw

you run out of camp and Thornclaw following right behind you, and I..." he then gave a helpless shrug. "I couldn't just sit there and wonder what was going on, so..."

He then nodded towards his siblings as my heart welled up with affection. "So I told them what I saw, and then we weren't too far behind you two."

Lightningstrike then nudged Swiftflight next to him. "This one was already bolting out of here before we were!"

As Swiftflight rolled his eyes, Goldenshine gave her son an affectionate look. "I'm certain he teleported here from how fast he was going."

As I flashed the gray black tom a grateful look, he gave a shy shrug. "Oh, please. I just..." He then gave me a wink. "...had something to report from the dawn patrol that couldn't wait."

I sniffed, nodding and winking back at my kin as everyone purred. "Riiiiight," I then meowed sarcastically.

"I was right behind Emberheart!" Lilypaw then chirped. "She told me something was going on with you, and I *had* to see if you were okay. Practicing the Back Kick *could* wait!"

I flashed my apprentice an amused, grateful look as Swiftflight rolled his eyes once again.

I then shifted my gaze towards Whitewing as she stepped forward. "We were right behind your apprentice!" the she-cat purred. Her gaze then softened as she lashed her tail towards the rest of the crowd. "We were all desperately worried about you, Lilypetal. I'm glad you're okay."

My goodness, I didn't think it was possible to feel so embarrassed, grateful, and full of love all at once.

I was certain that I was maybe hallucinating as I scanned my eyes across all of the cats that had come here just to *check* on me. *I had figured they'd all be gossiping about me back at camp... preparing to depose me. But...* "You guys... thank you," I eventually meowed, my

voice thick with emotion once again. "I really am okay now. And honestly..."

I then glanced at Thornclaw before looking back at the group. "...even better with you all here. You didn't have to come check on me like this."

Squirrelflight then let out a snort. "And that's exactly why we love it! And Lilypetal..." The dark ginger she-cat's gaze was warm as she stepped closer to me. "We don't think any less of you because you are *affected* by something that you went through."

I tried not to give a disappointed sigh. *Ah, so they heard that part.*

Squirrelflight's gaze then darkened. "Something and... *someone* that I still hate that you had to endure more than me, or any of us." After I gave her a reassuring glance – hoping she knew that I had no regrets about ever coming to her defense, she flashed me a grateful look and gave a definitive nod. "You are no less of a deputy, and no less of a cat."

Her gaze then hardened. "And I am *certain* that Bramblestar would agree. He wanted to be here too, but he wanted to start reassigning patrols so that he could give you your time."

My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open with complete humiliation and shock. "Squirrelflight, he did not!"

I then flicked my ears, continuing to be shocked, as Spiderleg spoke for the first time. "He did, Lilypetal, and you're going to let him!" the black and brown growled before looking away and shaking his head. "Foxdung, what a stubborn mouse-brain!"

Thornclaw and I exchanged an amused look as purrs rippled through the group once again. And Goldenshine flashed Spiderleg a warning, yet humored look before nodding back to me, her gray eyes gleaming teasingly. "So, what do you think, mother? Ready to get back to camp and relax?"

I closed my eyes for a moment as I gave a sniff. *Great StarClan, that's a question that I've wanted to completely block out since I became*

deputy, I thought.

I then sighed, glancing back at my mate, who was giving me a look that I'm certain he didn't want to look pleading... but it was.

I then took one more deep breath. *But it is one I should welcome, especially now, even if it makes me want to convulse*. "Yes," I sighed as I gave a nod. "Yes, I am."

I then was surprised as cats like Lilypaw, Emberheart, Goldenshine and Lightningstrike actually *yowled* in celebration, and they, along with Wrenfeather (who is too cool to cheer, I suppose) ran forward to join me and Thornclaw in an embrace. And as I felt their fur press against mine and their scents flood into my nose, I couldn't help but close my eyes with complete ease and happiness for a moment. Goodness gracious, this is going to help me recover more than anything else!

Emberheart had managed to get on my right side, leaning on my shoulder as she purred. "We all love you so much, Lilypetal."

"And we're here for you, no matter what!" Lightningstrike then chimed in.

"Absolutely," Wrenfeather then meowed.

"You're the best mentor ever – I promise that hasn't changed," Lilypaw then commented, looking warmly at me as my family began to step back. "And if you ever need to take a moment during our training sessions, *please* let me know."

It felt like my heart was going to ascend from my body at this point, but for a good reason this time as I looked gratefully back at my apprentice. "I will," I purred as I touched my nose to the younger she-cat's head. "Thank you, Lilypaw. You're the best apprentice ever, and I'm so proud of you. I hope I've been able to teach you well so far. And..."

I then took a deep breath as I turned to face everyone else. "I hope I've still managed to be at least an okay deputy despite all of this," I then meowed worriedly to everyone, my heart beginning to beat

faster as I then lowered my head to my paws. "I'm sorry if I haven't."

Squirrelflight gave another snort as she exchanged a glance with Whitewing. "Lilypetal, you must be joking," she muttered simply.

Whitewing nodded in agreement. "We're in the most capable paws with you!"

"Goodness gracious, you always seem to know what to do. I never would have guessed you were dealing with so much!" Daisy then commented, her blue eyes full of admiration. "During the flood, we could not have cleared the ThunderClan camp as quickly as we did without you."

I then looked back at Thornclaw, who I realized had been looking back at me as Daisy spoke. "Among many other things," my mate then purred, bringing me to purr and give him a lick on the cheek.

I then looked back at my friends and family, overwhelmed with gratitude. "Alright," I then meowed with a sigh. "I'll try to believe you all."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as Goldenshine snorted. "Great StarClan, a cat gets tormented by an evil demon cat, and suddenly they think they can't do anything right!"

Everyone *mrrowed* with laughter as we all then began to pad through the forest and back towards the makeshift ThunderClan camp.

As we walked, Thornclaw kept his tail wrapped around my back the entire time, and I couldn't help but just stare lovingly back at him for a moment, thanking StarClan over and over and over that this tom was here next to me. He'd never admit it fully, but I've really put him through so much. How did I get so lucky to get a tom that refuses to run even when I'm at my worst?

I then was filled with tenderness as I continued to look at the tom, certainty flooding through me. I wouldn't if it was the other way around, I know that for sure. And I'd plan to be as wonderful, thoughtful, patient, caring, and selfless as he is to me. "Thank you

so, so much again, Thornclaw," I meowed softly to the tom. "I promise, from now on, anything you say goes."

I then flicked my ears and narrowed my eyes. "Within reason."

Thornclaw purred with amusement. "Of course, Lilypetal. And I'll try to keep my requests *very* normal."

"Well now I doubt it," I teased the tom.

"I will!" Thornclaw meowed, his voice full of laughter. But I was suddenly filled with anticipation as he took a deep breath, his pale blue eyes full of reluctance. "However, I don't think you'll like what I'm going to say next..."

"Uh, oh," I said simply.

Thornclaw looked even more wary now. "I think that we should lay off of the-"

My eyes then widened as something hit me. "Oh, no, I just realized what you're about to say."

"I wonder if we should take a break from the hunt-"

"No!"

"I think that we should lay off of the hunting trips for a little while."

"Noooo!" I grieved out loud and very overdramatically. "Really?"

Thornclaw nuzzled my cheek as he purred, clearly amused by my reaction. "Oh, *trust* me, I don't want to as much as you do." He then pulled away, his gaze slightly pleading again. "But I think whenever you have a free moment, it should be used to take a breather and rest instead. At least for now!"

I let out a heavy sigh, looking away from my mate as I pretended to be upset. "You're making this more difficult with each heartbeat, Thornclaw."

"I know, but don't worry," the golden brown tabby then meowed

gently as he began to stroke my back with his tail, "we won't be hunting together, but I'll sure as heck be resting *with* you."

He then stopped his strokes so that he could wind my tail with his. "I want to be right there with you if you have any other nightmares or are having trouble."

His pale blue gaze then flashed with uncertainty and worry. "That is, if that's okay with you."

I immediately nodded back at the tom, hating once again that I had ever made him feel like that *wasn't* okay. "Of course it is, Thornclaw," I replied softly to him as I touched my nose to his. "Have no doubts about that ever again."

The two of us then pressed our muzzles together for a few moments, looked adoringly back at each other before quickening our pace to catch up with the others. My head was leaning on Thornclaw's shoulder, and I listened to my own heartbeat as it raced.

But again, for a good reason this time, because I could not *believe* what had just happened – from my first few moments waking up this morning all the way up until now.

I suppose I had just completely had an outburst and then received support from those I loved... but goodness gracious, it felt so life-changing. *The end of an old era, almost,* I though to myself. *I...*

A small chill then ran down my spine. *Great StarClan, I was chasing shadows for so long, and they finally turned around to get me back.*

I then took another deep breath. *And after what I've been through, those shadows will always be around... but I can still live my life with them. Pushing them away and forcing sunlight was not the answer. They can coexist.*

I then closed my eyes for a moment as I filled with ease. *And they will.*

Feeling encouraged, I managed to stand up straight and lift my head as I walked beside Thornclaw, taking a moment to look around at our healing forest. It *almost* looked normal now – new

shrubs and grass beginning to grow as everything dried up. *Some flowers were beginning to bloom too!* I then thought excitedly.

I then blinked. *Wait, hold on.*

I looked back, double checking that the purple plant that I was seeing was what I thought it was.

And it sure was.

Lavender was beginning to grow next to some brambles, though it looked like it had begun to grow *days* ago from how full and beautiful it was.

I couldn't even believe that it had managed to bloom like this amidst all of the flooding. *But newleaf is on its way, I suppose.*

And I also couldn't help but wonder if this "flower" was here for a reason, and I suddenly felt like there was another presence here. *Interesting. Very interesting.*

And it only made me feel more at peace, more than I had in *seasons*, as I walked alongside Thornclaw, and behind almost everyone I cared about, back to camp.

Chapter 25

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Got chamomile?" I heard Jayfeather call out to me from the other side of the medicine den.

"Yes, plenty!" I called back.

"Great. What about goldenrod?"

"Goldenshine can confirm that there is lots of goldenrod!"

The medicine cat simply grunted in acknowledgement. "Marigold?"

"It is *so* golden over here, I can't even begin to describe it to you," I purred. Jayfeather then let out a deep sigh as I scanned over the piles of herbs in front of me. "Do you have cobwebs over there?"

"Practically getting tangled up in them," Jayfeather muttered, causing me to purr once again as I realized that he was trying to make a joke. "Have anything else over there?"

I narrowed my eyes, letting out a contemplative sigh as my eyes fell on one of my piles. "Yes..." I murmured after a moment. "But I cannot for the life of me remember what this is called."

Jayfeather snapped his head over his shoulder. "You don't remember what it's called?"

"I'm surprised I've remembered anything up until this point."

The gray tabby tom rolled his eyes, huffing as he seemed to be assembling a bunch of cobwebs together. "Bring one over to me and I'll tell you."

I stared back down at the mystery herb pile, my nose wrinkling. "...I'm kind of afraid to."

"Why?" the tom asked in a groan.

"...Jayfeather, this stuff kind of looks like dung."

Jayfeather now fully turned around to face me, his blind eyes looking utterly appalled. "Goldenshine, are you talking about burdock root?"

"*Burdock root!*" I exclaimed excitedly. "That's what it is!"

Jayfeather sighed yet again, shaking his head as he padded over to my side of the medicine den. "Great StarClan, Goldenshine, try using your head for something other than holding your ears up." I then gave the medicine cat a light nudge as he bent down and sniffed the pile. "Yes, that is burdock root."

He then turned right back around to return to his own herb piles. "-and if that's what your dung looks like, I'm concerned."

I snorted in reply. "Sounds like yours does too, considering you knew what I was talking about when I described burdock root that way!"

"Let's continue taking inventory, please," Jayfeather then muttered tautly as he sat down.

"Oh, alright!" I purred reluctantly before looking back at my stashes. "Got much dock?"

"We're good there," Jayfeather answered. "How's your horsetail?"

"Jayfeather, you silly thing. I have a cat tail!" I meowed cheerfully. "Thanks for asking though!"

Jayfeather looked over his shoulder again, his blind blue eyes narrowed. "I am heartbeats away from throwing you out of this den."

"Oh, how I love your empty threats," I purred wistfully, causing Jayfeather to groan again. "Do you have much snakeroot?"

"Just enough."

"Oh! How about honey?"

Jayfeather gave a lash of his tail as he stood up. "I've got some on some leaves over in the corner. Let me check."

"You do that," I called out as the medicine cat walked deeper into the den. I then scanned my eyes over all of the leaves, flowers, and roots that were sprawled out in front of me.

This sight, mixed with all of the stirring, training, and murmurs I could hear outside in the camp clearing made me let out a long groan, and I found myself lying down and burying my face into a big pile of yarrow. "Oh my goodness gracious, I can't believe we are going into battle tomorrow morning," I then meowed, my voice muffled.

I could hear Jayfeather let out a sigh full of dread. "And without Rowanstar's permission too," he added.

"Oh, that's the kicker!" I replied. "If it weren't for the flooding, ShadowClan probably would have been able to take care of this *long* ago."

"Well, they haven't," Jayfeather meowed bitterly. "And that thought is apparently making Bramblestar lose sleep." After a moment, he then meowed, "We're good on honey, by the way."

"How exciting," I muttered sarcastically. "But seriously, it's a bit frustrating having to scramble and prepare for battle now because of something like this."

I could hear Jayfeather's pawsteps getting closer as he seemed to be returning to his corner of the medicine den. "Since when have you *ever* not wanted a battle?" he asked me.

"Never. But I'm still mad." *And anyway, I'll probably catch sight of those stupid kittypets tomorrow, the adrenaline will rush in, and I'll get over it and chase those idiots off with their tails in between their legs!*

But like I'd said, I was still very frustrated with this situation, and how I hoped that Bramblestar was making the right decision.

The ThunderClan leader had brought a patrol to ShadowClan just earlier today, wanting to see if they needed assistance with the kittypets that were apparently terrorizing them in their own territory. Rowanstar had declined, but nevertheless, Bramblestar had called a Clan meeting just a little while ago and declared that he would lead a patrol to fight the kittypets. It had took some convincing (understandably), but eventually, the rest of the Clan had given in and many of them volunteered to fight. Including myself, of course. It had been decided that the patrol would leave at dawn.

And now, the Clan was prepping for the excitement of the upcoming day, and I was making myself useful by helping Jayfeather organize and take inventory of all of the herbs he might need after the fight. He didn't even have Leafpool right now – after going with Bramblestar to ShadowClan, she had decided to stay back to help Littlecloud take care of Dawnpelt and her soon-to-be-arriving kits.

But anyway, I had been wanting to talk with the tom for a *while* now. As I would eventually share with him, my life had been quite chaotic lately and full with lots of annoyances and turmoil, and I hadn't been able to speak with him extensively hardly at *all* lately.

I still didn't know how Jayfeather had managed to be such an outlet for me, but he was.

And I felt a small wave of affection for my friend as I heard his pawsteps come to an abrupt stop. "What are you doing?" he asked from behind me.

I didn't move, my face still full of leaves. "Shoving my head in the yarrow."

The medicine cat scoffed. "What in the name of StarClan is wrong with you? That is absolutely disgusting." He then sighed as he seemed to pad back to his herbs. "I have no idea where that mouth has been!"

"Cats throw this stuff up, right? Shouldn't matter."

Jayfeather let out an annoyed growl, probably about the spit a retort back at me, but he seemed to cut himself off as I heard a new set of pawsteps enter the den. "Please take your daughter away, Thornclaw."

I felt a rush of excitement and affection as the medicine cat addressed my father and as I heard him chuckle. "Oh, yeah?" I then heard his pawsteps pad up right next to me, my head still in the yarrow. "Great StarClan, Jayfeather, were you so done with her that you sedated her?"

"Do *not* give him any ideas," I meowed sharply, voice still muffled.

I then heard my father let out a purr. "Oh! So you are alive!" I then felt him flick my ear. "Then get up – I want to look at my daughter's face instead of a pile of yarrow."

I sighed, beginning to roll over. "Oh, *fine*." I then got up on my paws, meeting my father's warm, kind pale blue gaze that always brought me so much comfort and safety. I let out a purr, touching my nose to his. "Hi, father!" I then meowed cheerfully.

"Hi, Goldenshine," the golden brown tabby tom replied warmly. I was then surprised to see him pull away quickly, his nose wrinkled. "Yuck, you smell now."

I flashed my father an apologetic glance. "Yarrow smells!"

"Did you come in here for a reason?" Jayfeather then cut in.

Thornclaw rolled his eyes, flashing me an amused glance. "Well, I wanted to check on Goldenshine," he answered as he gave me another flick on the ear. "But I also wanted to see if you had any chamomile?"

I gave Thornclaw an enthusiastic nod. "We sure do!" I snatched some from a pile and glanced back towards Jayfeather. "Can I give Thornclaw some?"

Jayfeather glanced over his shoulder once again. "Would you accept if I said no?"

"Nope!"

"And I wouldn't either," Thornclaw muttered as he watched me set the chamomile down at his paws. I then lifted my head back up to meet his gaze full of gratitude. "Thanks, Goldenshine."

"Of course, Thornclaw!" I purred, giving a flick of my ears as I also noticed the worry that also overtook my father's gaze. "Is it for Lilypetal?"

I watched, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with concern as my father sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. When they opened again, they were filled with exhaustion, but also an *insane* amount of relief. "The one and only," he then purred.

"How is she doing?" I then pressed him, an edge of desperation in my voice. I hadn't heard an update about my mother since we all returned to camp after her attack, and I hoped with everything that she was feeling at least a little better after all of that.

Great *StarClan*, how I'd hated seeing her like that. It was never a comforting feeling to see your mother in such a panicked and distressed state. Obviously I'd seen her in distress before, but *never* like this. *So terrified and so, so helpless...*

Wrenfeather, Emberheart, Lightningstrike, Swiftflight and I had found Lilypetal and Thornclaw when my father was still trying to bring Lilypetal back down to earth, and we'd simply watched and stayed back in silence as she slowly began to calm down. *And thank goodness she did...* I thought with immense relief. *With everything she has gone through, I'm surprised an episode like this didn't happen long ago. With everything she's said about her nightmares, I should have anticipated it more...*

And I continued to be amazed by my father as he had calmed my mother down in the absolute *best* way. And of course, since we'd returned to camp, he hadn't left her side as far as I knew.

And while Lilypetal had been the one to experience an attack, I was certain that Thornclaw had gone through a lot of mental turmoil as well as I watched him sit down, his shoulders sinking with

exhaustion. "She's been in her nest all day, and I've been with her. She's still a bit restless – I've watched her go in and out of sleep. Her..." He then took a deep breath, his gaze darkening. "Her mind has been through a lot today..."

"...and recently," I murmured as I shook my head back and forth, guilt beginning to overwhelm me as a horrible thought crossed my mind. "I *hate* that I didn't even realize."

Thornclaw sniffed, putting the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "Goldenshine, *trust me*, your mother was trying her hardest to make sure that you and everyone else *didn't* realize. And anyway," he then let out a bitter huff, his eyes narrowing. "You've had your own problems."

Those words made me roll my eyes. "That just makes me feel worse."

"Don't," my father insisted sharply, "The very reason Lilypetal got here is because she didn't take the time to take care of herself and solely focused on taking care of others. I don't want you doing that either."

I then flicked my ears as the tom peered past me, his pale blue eyes gleaming with humor. "And I'm sure Jayfeather's looking out for you too!"

Jayfeather avert his gaze from his herbs. "I'm actually trying to figure out which one of these herbs could sedate her if needed."

I rolled my eyes towards the tom as I gave a lash of my tail. "He will, I purred, bringing Jayfeather to simply snort. I then looked back at my father, meeting him with a warm glance. "And I know you will," I meowed softly as I was filled with affection and put the tip of my tail on my father's shoulder. "Lilypetal is the luckiest she-cat in the world to have you looking out for her." *My father is one solid tom, and I'd scream that from the top of the Highledge!*

I then lightly nudged Thornclaw with my tail. "You take care of yourself too! Go on a patrol every once in a while, will you?"

Thornclaw rolled his eyes as he gave a chuckle. "Will do," he purred before giving a nod, his eyes full of love. "But it's my utmost pleasure to stay with Lilypetal for now."

The fact that she was lying down in the warriors den right now hit me all over again, and I couldn't help but sigh with relief. "Great StarClan, I'm so glad that she's resting, *and* that Bramblestar didn't make her go on the patrol to visit Rowanstar." I then snorted. "I bet she hated that though."

"Oh, she did," Thornclaw muttered. And after we exchanged a purr of amusement, my father let out a heavy sigh, and his gaze darkened. "She says she still wants to lead the battle patrol with Bramblestar tomorrow, but I'm not sure how I feel about that..."

Great StarClan, I wasn't sure how I felt about that either, but I knew there was only so much we could do about that. "Well, if she does, we'll both be there to keep an eye on her!" I tried to meow enthusiastically.

Thornclaw snorted. "That's nothing new for me," he meowed, a gleam of affection in his eyes.

But his gaze grew concerned after a moment. "But you're doing okay?" he then asked me.

I sniffed at that question – it was a general question, but I knew exactly what my father was probably implying to. He was one of the few cats that was actually caught up to speed. *Thanks to Swiftflight...* "Of course," I then answered him, trying to tell myself that as much as him. "The thing that has been tormenting *me* is hopefully... *over*." *Again, thanks to Swiftflight...*

I then took a deep, satisfied breath and gave a sharp nod. "I'm working towards a fully Breezepelt-free life – the way it used to be!"

I then flicked my ears as I heard Jayfeather grunt behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see his head still down towards his herbs, but the tip of his tail was twitching tautly. *You good there, bud?*

I narrowed my eyes back at him for a moment before turning back around and pushing the chamomile closer to Thornclaw. "But don't worry about me. Get this to Lilypetal. By the way..."

I tilted my head as something occurred to me. "How did you know to ask for chamomile?"

Thornclaw gave a shrug, his eyes suddenly gleaming with love and grief. "Ah, well, back in the day, Snowflight taught me a thing or two when she gushed about everything Jayfeather was teaching her."

With those words, all of the love and grief in my father's eyes seemed to rush through my body. I looked fondly back at Jayfeather, who seemed to pause in his work for just a moment before continuing on.

I then felt Thornclaw give me a nudge. "Clearly you also learned a bit from her! Look at you in here!" The two of us then exchanged a warm look, and the tom touched his nose to my head before picking up the chamomile in his jaws. "Thanks again, Goldenshine. I'll leave you two to it!"

I was full of gratitude and affection as I watched my father go. "Bye!" And once his tail had disappeared from sight, I let out a huff as a certain name was suddenly at the forefront of my mind. "Snowflight..." I murmured aloud as my heart sank. "I *hate* that we can't go and see her tonight." *Thanks to this battle happening tomorrow, we* can't *go...* I thought sadly. Jayfeather and I, unfortunately, had figured it was in our best interest to stay in camp this time. Didn't feel the best though...

And the sigh Jayfeather let out was enough to let me know he felt the same way. "Me too," he then said out loud. His next words came out much more sour. "You got that extra visit though..."

"That's true!" I agreed enthusiastically.

"You know you could have woken me up that night, mouse-brain," Jayfeather then muttered as he slightly turned to me. "I would have gone with you."

"Really?" I pressed, truly in disbelief. "You would have?"

"*Yes?"*

"Oh, I guess I did deprive you of Snowflight."

"I can go and see Snowflight whenever I want to," Jayfeather snapped. "I'm also fine doing things for her sister sometimes, believe it or not."

"You threatened to *sedate* me earlier, so maybe not..."

Oh, I fully believed him. I just loved to tease.

"Alright. Don't then," Jayfeather then meowed dismissively, turning back to his herbs. "I won't fight it."

I then flicked my ears as I heard the medicine cat let out a huff. "Hm, it looks like we're low on comfrey," he murmured.

I hissed in frustration. "Shoot! What does it look like?"

Jayfeather snatched one from the small pile and showed it to me. "Here's one. They come off of purple flowers."

I gave a sharp nod. "Got it!" I practically whipped myself around and began to trot out of the den. "I'll go get some!"

"You will *not*," Jayfeather hissed to me, bringing me to come to an abrupt stop. "I can't guarantee you'll find the right thing. I'll go."

I turned back towards the medicine cat, bewildered. "Jayfeather, you can't go by yourself!"

"I am perfectly capable, you mouse-brain," Jayfeather muttered through gritted teeth.

"But the forest is still screwed up from the flooding! I don't want you to slip!" I insisted. And when Jayfeather simply rolled his eyes in response, I huffed with satisfaction and ran up to stand next to him. "We'll go together!"

"My hero."

"Be quiet," I muttered in response to the sarcastic comment as we made our way out of the medicine den. "Is there anything else we need to grab while we're out?"

"Comfrey should be all."

"Wow, we're so good."

"Mmhm."

I then purred, feeling a rush of joy and gratitude for this time and *finally* being able to catch up with my friend. Even if we weren't taking our full trip together all the way to the Moonpool, this trek was an opportunity now to talk.

And I certainly had something now to talk to him about. "Question," I blurted out.

Jayfeather closed his eyes, sighing. "Great StarClan, what?"

"When I said Breezepelt's name earlier, you grunted," I meowed, recalling the tom's behavior from earlier. "Why?"

The medicine cat snorted. "I could give you *hundreds* of reasons why."

I rolled my eyes at those words. "I know, but it's not like you grunt every time he is mentioned," I pointed out, my curiosity rising. "I just wondered if something was going on on your end?"

I watched, practically *overwhelmed* now with anticipation of what would come out of my friend's mouth as he narrowed his eyes. "I just felt weird, I guess. I've heard Breezepelt's name more often than I'd like lately." He then shrugged. "And it's been uttered by cats that I'm close with, which is strange."

I blinked in surprise. "*Cats*? As in plural?" I pressed, my curiosity at its *peak*. "Who else is mentioning him?" *Who else has the displeasure of encountering him, more like.*

Jayfeather looked off for a moment, his gaze darkening as he shook his head. "Lionblaze," he uttered after a few heartbeats.

My mouth seemed to drop to the grass below. "Lionblaze!?" I nearly cried out. "Wait..." I then blinked as I was brought back to several days ago, just after the stoat battle.

It still haunted me to see the way that Lionblaze had actually nodded towards Breezepelt... *cordially*.

I didn't realize, and I guess I had hoped, that nothing had come out of that. Well, maybe something didn't... "Did something *else* happen with Breezepelt and Lionblaze?"

Jayfeather took a deep breath, seeming to brace himself, before answering. "Post stoat battle, after I tended to your wounds and sent you away..." He trailed off for a moment. "Lionblaze told me that Breezepelt had saved *him* from a stoat too."

I suddenly felt like I existed out of my own body with that news. "*What!?"*

"Yeah," the medicine cat answered simply. "He apparently ripped Lionblaze out of the tunnels when a stoat was trying to rip *him* to shreds."

Ain't no way... "Great StarClan, what the heck is his agenda here?" I asked angrily. "He's really trying to redeem himself with every single cat in his life, isn't he?"

"Yes..." Jayfeather breathed, his gaze full of disappointment as his head fell to the ground. "And according to Lionblaze, I guess it's working."

I stared worriedly back at him. "...what do you mean?"

"Well, he told me the two of them spoke later, and... Lionblaze forgave him."

Great StarClan, enough with the curveballs. I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. "*What!?*"

Jayfeather cringed back, letting out a hiss. "Goldenshine, you're going to make me go deaf too if you keep yowling like that."

"Sorry," I meowed quickly before giving a quick shake of my head – that certainly wasn't going to straighten it out right now though. "So, Lionblaze actually forgave him? He decided that he was okay with everything Breezepelt had done before?"

"To some extent, I guess."

"Wow," was all I could meow for a moment. I legitimately thought Jayfeather was pulling my tail. "*Wow*."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as Jayfeather let out a long sigh. "I'm almost worried that Breezepelt will think I've forgiven him too, when I absolutely *haven't*." Before I even needed to ask for one, the tom explained. "Breezepelt had some nasty wounds after the battle like you did, and... I gave Crowfeather some herbs to bring to Breezepelt."

I stared wide-eyed back at my friend. "Whoa..." I breathed. I then gave a shrug despite my surprise. "Well, I can understand that – that was your duty as a medicine cat, and Breezepelt just happened to be the cat you were helping."

Jayfeather snorted. "Thank StarClan you understand. Sometimes I have trouble letting myself be okay with it."

"Well, you should be," I insisted. I then sniffed and gave a shrug. "Not sure I would do the same, but I get it."

I then narrowed my eyes as I recalled something the medicine cat had said. "So... you haven't forgiven him?"

"No. I doubt I ever will," Jayfeather answered, his voice low with contempt as he shook his head. "He threatened to kill Lionblaze, and he said that he was *glad* that Hollyleaf had died."

I raised my eyebrows. I hadn't known about that second thing, and it made me feel *sick*.

I put the tip of my tail on Jayfeather's shoulder as he went on. "And

then there's everything that he's done to you..." he then murmured. "Lionblaze may have forgiven him, but I *refuse* to."

I simply nodded back at the medicine cat, but I still couldn't believe that what he had shared with me was real. *Seriously, is Lionblaze out of his mind?* I wondered. *He seems like a sensible cat, but how can he even explain this?* "Well, I am on the same page as you, *completely*. I can't believe he said that about Hollyleaf."

I then sighed and shook my head. *Goodness, I could never forgive him. I don't see how Swiftflight ever could either...*

I then flicked my ears, looking more urgently back at Jayfeather. "Oh! You don't even know the latest about what Swiftflight and I have dealt with with Breezepelt."

I then proceeded to *spill* absolutely everything that I had endured *after* the stoat battle. I hated that this was the case, but I hadn't even told Jayfeather about the night that Breezepelt had found me leaving the Moonpool and tried to speak with me.

As I had expected, Jayfeather reacted strongly to that. "And you continue to prove that you should've taken me with you that night," he meowed bitterly to me.

I sniffed at that comment. "I think this proves that you *shouldn't* have been there, Jayfeather!" I insisted to him. "I've never seen you and Breezepelt interact, and I don't want to start now."

"I wonder if we should."

"Don't even think about it."

Of course, this meant that Jayfeather also didn't know how Swiftflight had snuck off to WindClan to tell Breezepelt to stay away, which the medicine cat was actually *impressed* by.

He also didn't know about the fight that Dustystorm and I had. And to be honest... I was almost reluctant to share it because I knew that my best friend would probably give me grief about it.

Because it wasn't even much of a fight. It was more like one of the

parties said something the other didn't like, causing the other to shut them out. However, Jayfeather has experienced one of these parties firsthand...

"Well, that was spectacularly immature of you, Goldenshine," Jayfeather commented after I was done."

At his comment, I groaned. "I'm glad that my emotional explosions get your seal of approval."

I then gave a definitive nod even though the tom couldn't see it. "Well, there it is. I hate that I had updates to give you, but there's the latest in the Breezepelt idiocy saga."

"I can't believe Swiftflight actually went to WindClan to try and put a stop to it," Jayfeather muttered, his eyes thoughtful. "That furball was taking a big risk."

I began to shake my head slowly, hating having to think of my son's choices again. "Trust me, I know..." I then took a deep breath, decided to further air out all of my concerns to my friend. "This may sound weird..."

"I'm certain that it will."

I sighed, giving Jayfeather a nudge. "I..." I then trailed off, hating speaking this words out loud. "I can't help but wonder if Swiftflight would forgive Breezepelt like Lionblaze is."

"Really?" Jayfeather pressed, sounding genuinely surprised. "Based off of what?"

"He's... he's just a bit more shifty than I'd like whenever we talk about his father," I explained.

"Swiftflight? *Shifty*?" Jayfeather repeated overdramatically, causing me to roll my eyes. "Who would have ever thought?"

"Shut up," I meowed before shaking my head dismissively. "I don't know. I want to hope we're on the same page."

"Interesting," Jayfeather then replied. "Well, if he's not, he's not."

"Huh?"

"Do you think that I like that Lionblaze is forgiving Breezepelt? I want to hit him over the head!" the medicine cat explained, bringing me to purr. "But it's not my choice to make for him."

I narrowed my eyes, contemplating those words as I stared ahead. "I am his mother though," I fought back.

"And StarClan bless Swiftflight's soul for that."

"I hate you."

"Good," Jayfeather meowed. And after I rolled my eyes, the tom went on. "But seriously, don't be so overbearing. Swiftflight told Breezepelt to go away, so he probably is on the same page anyway."

He then sniffed. "Or trying to be."

My eyes widened, my stomach seeming to twist with fear, but before I could ask Jayfeather to elaborate, he flicked his ears next to me. "I smell comfrey. Here we are." He then padded forward towards a bunch of flowers. "Collect as much as you can."

I ran up to stand next to him. "That was the plan!" I then let out a gasp. "Aw, we rhymed!"

"Shut up."

Silence then overtook the both of us as we both urgently began to snatch the leaves from the purple flowers, collecting as much as we could as the sun continued to set above us.

But it felt like we had only been gathering for what felt like a few moments when suddenly a *very* familiar scent flooded through my nose.

And it caused me to drop all of my comfrey. "No..." I breathed,

I took a few pawsteps forward, lifting my head up slightly. "No way..."

"What is wrong with you?" Jayfeather asked me, irritated by my evasiveness.

I snapped my head back towards him. "Do you not smell that?" I asked the tom before sniffing again and beginning to follow the scent a few fox-lengths ahead. "Nightwing came through here earlier."

Saying that out loud filled me with *anger*, my teeth barred as I shook my head in disbelief. "Great StarClan, you little..."

Jayfeather clearly had no idea what was going on. "Goldenshine, what are you meowing on about?"

I let out an annoyed huff, forcing myself to pause my search as I sat down. "Nightwing – our *Clanmate* – came through here earlier," I repeated to the medicine cat. "Can you smell her?"

"Yes. So?"

"Pretty faint, huh?"

"...I think so," Jayfeather muttered, his eyes narrowed. "Why?"

I don't know why, but the tom's question suddenly brought me to *erupt* with information. "I wish I could tell you!" I nearly cried out, bringing Jayfeather to roll his eyes. "Jayfeather, Dustystorm and I have watched that mouse-brain sneak out of camp for almost *two moons* now, and sometimes is gone for almost a *day's* worth."

I then sighed and rolled my eyes. "Of course she takes advantage of everyone being distracted with this battle, that selfish..."

I then took a deep breath, trying to ground myself even *slightly*. "Dustystorm and I followed her one night," I then revealed.

"Well, of course you did," Jayfeather muttered.

"And she's sneaking off to the Twolegplace! I think..." I then stared worriedly back at my friend. "I think she'd meeting with someone there, Jayfeather."

"Oh, yeah?"

"*Yeah*," I replied sharply, my head beginning to shake slowly. "I hate to say his name again, but great StarClan, I can't even begin to describe to you how giddy, over the moon, but also *nervous* beyond belief that I was whenever I met with Breezepelt secretly. My head felt hollow and I felt like I was seeing stars all of the time."

"Are you sure you weren't just sick?" Jayfeather asked coldly.

I snorted in response. "Well, now I maybe wonder that. But... something about secretly meeting with a cat you care about... one that you aren't even supposed to be with... is just so *exciting*, Jayfeather," I explained. "I hate how exciting that was."

His eyes dark, Jayfeather gave me a slow nod as he listened. "I never got to be *excited* in my case, but I suppose I see what you mean." At those words, I flashed him a look of sympathy, and I watched as he padded deeper into the forest towards another clump of comfrey. "I'm still listening. So you think Nightwing is doing the same thing?"

I gave a sharp nod. "Nightwing is one of my best friends, Jayfeather. I may have just been able to see her back through that fence, but I could tell exactly what was going on, and I *resonated* with that."

I then took a deep breath, trying to control my rising anger. "And she has the *nerve* to act offended every time we try to ask her about it. Like Dustystorm and I are the problem for being worried. She's avoiding camp, avoiding her own brother... avoiding *me*."

I then sighed, shaking my head. "She's acting like a stranger. Like ThunderClan is some kind of inconvenience now. And I am *so* tired of her looking at me like I'm the unreasonable one."

"You usually are," Jayfeather cut in.

But I ignored him. "She thinks she's being subtle slipping out at night and smelling like Twoleg stink, but I don't know what she think she's pulling off." I then gave a sheepish shrug. "Maybe I sound like a hypocrite, but she *is* being selfish. There are no ifs,

ands, or buts about that. She's sneaking off to some silly kittypet and she's letting the Clan fend for themselves during one of our *lowest* points."

Saying that out loud and fully letting it process filled me with utter *amazement.* "Gosh, it's like her heart's rotted her brain out," I then meowed, my slightly shaky voice echoing through the quiet forest. "But at the same time... she's *heartless*."

"*Heartless?"*

I then nearly gasped as shrubs just a little ways ahead rustled violently. And I was completely appalled when Nightwing crawled out from them, her fur bristling and green eyes blazing. "Rotted my *brain out*?" she then repeated. "I cannot believe that you just said that about me."

I could only stare, completely astounded, for a moment. "Oh my StarClan, Nightwing..."

I then heard Jayfeather let out a grunt behind me. "Well. That answers that."

I snapped my head back to him. "What are you talking about?"

"Her scent wasn't faint," the tom explained. "The comfrey was overtaking it."

I barred my teeth, holding back a hiss. "I'm about ready to sedate you right now..."

I then whipped my head back around as Nightwing spoke again. "You want to talk about me behind my back like that, Goldenshine?" she barked. "At least have the spine to do it to my face!"

I widened my eyes back at the she-cat. "Oh, so you are actually going to let me talk then? I've barely been able to get a sentence out with you for the last two moons with how quickly you run away!"

"I feel like I have no choice with how much you and Dustystorm would interrogate me!"

"Interrogate?" I repeated, my head practically full of fog as I still tried to process that Nightwing was even here. "Nightwing, we are just worried about you!"

"So worried that you followed me to the Twolegplace, huh?" Nightwing bit back, causing me to roll my eyes. "How could I ever trust you two when you sneak around me like that?"

I was certain the expression I was probably giving Nightwing right now looked *crazy*. "Trust us? Trust *us*? That is *rich*, Nightwing," I growled back at her. "You're blowing us off like you're not doing a thing wrong, and when we followed you, we realized that that was not the case at all."

Nightwing hissed with rage. "Stop acting like you know what's going on, Goldenshine!"

"Enlighten me, then!" I demanded, my eyes narrowing. "I'd argue that you owe your Clanmates honesty when your behavior starts to look like betrayal."

"I am *not* betraying ThunderClan."

"Alright, you keep telling yourself that," I answered coldly. "But from where I'm standing, it feels like you'd rather be frolicking and carefree with some soft, pampered kittypet than standing beside your Clan when they need you!"

Nightwing green gaze looked like two green flames. "I can't believe you would ever think so little of me."

"Oh, trust me, me neither!" I yowled back. But with my next words, I forced my voice to soften. "Nightwing, from the day you decided to join ThunderClan, you were truly one of the most loyal, dedicated, and spirited Clan cats that I have ever seen in my entire *life*. I didn't think anything in the world could take you away from ThunderClan."

Some of my anger then managed to be overtaken by grief as I stared back at the she-cat who was full of nothing but fury. "I have no idea what has changed... and..." My next words then came out in a shaky

whisper. "It hurts me that you feel like you can't tell me what is going on, Nightwing. Really, really hurts!"

I then was surprised to see Nightwing's gaze fill up with sorrow. "Believe it or not, Goldenshine, I am hurting too," she said, her voice also lowering. "In fact, I am tormented by this *every day*!"

I narrowed my eyes back at her. "I could not be happier to hear that. It should torment you." Nightwing's gaze then seemed to flash with hurt, but I pushed on. "Maybe on day you'll feel so tormented that you come clean. Maybe tell me who this kittypet tom is that has made you lose your mind."

I then sniffed, looking to my side. "Hopefully that day will come while Dustystorm and I are still around."

"What are you talking about?" Nightwing pressed.

I began shaking my head as my voice rose. "I said it before and I'll say it again – you'll lose us if you keep hiding things from us, Nightwing." *Dustystorm didn't seem sure about that, but how long can we go on like this?*

"Believe it or not, I'd still lose you guys if I didn't."

I flicked my ears back at the she-cat. "And how does that make sense?" I asked, almost purring at the absurdity of that statement. "You're sure causing a lot of damage with the way you're handling things right now!"

"*Believe* me, Goldenshine. I don't have a choice!"

At this point, I was *appalled*. "How dense are you?" I nearly cried out. "Great StarClan, you haven't even admitted that what you're doing is wrong!"

"Oh... I know that it's wrong."

"Then *why* are you doing it?" I nearly yowled out. "I feel like I don't even know who you are anymore, Nightwing!"

Those words seemed to echo infinitely out into the forest, and I

could almost picture all of the prey running away ThunderClan territory.

And after the echo faded away, there was silence.

Nightwing simply stared back at me through all of this, her green eyes looking as full of pain as they would be if I had ripped one of her legs off.

And for the first time tonight, I worried if I had maybe gone too far.

When she finally spoke again, her voice seemed to slice through the silence. "You know what?" she meowed, her voice hoarse with emotion. "I don't either. In fact, I feel like there is something wrong with me."

Before I could even think of how to reply to that, the black she-cat turned around and began to walk away.

I let out a helpless sigh, immediately padding after her. "Nightwing!" I cried out. "You can't even tell me who the kittypet is?"

My Clanmate paused for just a moment, not looking back. "No."

My heart then sank as I watched her pelt away. "Don't follow me!"

That I did. And for several heartbeats, all I could do was stare of at the place where Nightwing had disappeared.

I couldn't even move, practically paralyzed with all of the anger, confusion, and guilt that I felt.

I then heard pawsteps approaching me, and I felt a tail brush against my shoulder. I turned my head and was surprised to see that Jayfeather was now standing next to me, his blind eyes dark, yet thoughtful.

Great StarClan, I was so embarrassed and guilty that I couldn't even talk, and I was shocked when the medicine cat spoke first. "Hey?"

"What?" I replied, my voice hoarse from emotion... and the yelling.

"I'll carry all of this comfrey back," Jayfeather meowed, his voice calm and even. "But at least try to stay nearby so that I don't slip on a puddle with my mouth full of comfrey."

I let out a sniff, and then the tom went on, his gaze sincere. "And when we get back to the medicine den, I give you full permission to put your head back into the pile of yarrow, if you want to."

I could only stare back at the tom, overwhelmed with affection, before he then nodded and began to pad forward. "Come on, let's go."

And go we did. And I forced my paws to move, even though every step toward camp felt *wrong*. My chest still burned from everything I'd spat at Nightwing. I'd wanted to shake sense into her, to make her feel the weight of what she was doing - but *goodness*, the way her face had fallen... *that really wasn't what I meant to do,* I thought. *I hadn't meant to hurt her like that. I... just wanted an explanation!*

The worst part? If I was being honest with myself, those are the exact words I would've needed to hear when I was sneaking off to meet Breezepelt. I would've needed someone to shake me violently and tell me I was being selfish. *I maybe would have had to be told I was heartless for things to get through to me...*

I tried to tell myself that I told Nightwing what she needed to hear, but at the same time.... I couldn't stop wondering if I'd just lost my best friend. *And... calling her heartless... that was too far. And I ripped her apart behind her back...* I told myself, my eyes screwing shut for a moment. *No wonder she can't tell me anything...*

I edged closer to Jayfeather as we walked, making sure he had his footing as we walked deeper into the forest. *I haven't managed to scorch this friendship to ashes, at least,* I thought as I managed to feel some gratitude. This short tempered, emotionally unavailable medicine cat was still choosing to walk next to me, even after witnessing that spectacular disaster. He didn't press and didn't judge, *shockingly*. And that almost made the guilt worse.

Because what if I didn't get Nightwing back?

StarClan, I would let Breezepelt pester me a hundred times over if it meant I didn't have to watch my best friend walk away from me like that.

By the time ThunderClan's scent wrapped around us, thick and familiar, my anger was gone.

All that was left was guilt.

Chapter 26

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

The only thing that was keeping this sleepless night bearable was the warmth of Cherryfall's fur pressed up against me, and her sweet scent flooding into my nostrils.

Otherwise, this was a completely miserable existence.

The day had been a long one – Lilypetal's panic episode felt like at *least* a quarter moon ago, but that had only been this morning. After all of us had returned with her back to camp, I'd been on back to back border and hunting patrols and den repairs. *But I almost appreciated the distraction...* I thought.

A chill then ran down my spine. *Seeing Lilypetal crumble like that ... I didn't want to think about that anymore*, I told myself, *especially when I'm almost certain that her nightmares probably played a part.*

I then flicked my ears in surprise. *Uh, oh... What if I'm on the same trajectory as she is? Am I going to reach my breaking point too?* I then sighed and closed my eyes for a moment. *I still want to talk to her about all of this just as much as I do Jayfeather... but I wouldn't dare bother her while she's trying to rest.*

I then opened my eyes. *Trying to rest...* I then repeated. *I wish I could do that.*

But I really didn't think that I could. The amount of discomfort and fear that I felt in *my* nightmares seriously made me wonder how I ever handled the Dark Forest.

And I was *tired*. I mean, of course I was – I'd nearly pulled an all-nighter the night before, and I probably would tonight too. *I can be certain I* will *break down like Lilypetal if I have to experience any more of these awful dreams.*

But there was *no way* I was not going to accidentally doze off if I stayed here like this.

After a large yawn, I very reluctantly and gently stood up from mine and Cherryfall's nest, trying with all of my might not to wake the she-cat as I shifted away from her. Thank StarClan, my mate seemed sound asleep, and she was doing the adorable thing she did where she covered her eyes with her tail.

I let out a longing sigh, softly brushing my tail along her flank. *Sorry to leave you, beautiful. I'll be back soon.*

Then, after a quiet deep breath, I turned around and practically tip-toed out of the warriors den. *Great StarClan, I probably look ridiculous*, I thought bitterly.

Once I was out in the tunnel clearing, I flicked my ears at the sight of Rosepetal, who was standing guard at the camp entrance. I couldn't help but let out a quiet purr of amusement as I noticed she seemed to be trying with all of her might not to fall asleep.

I flashed the pale ginger she-cat a sympathetic look as I passed her. "Careful," I whispered, "Bramblestar will probably make you do a second night if you sleep on the job."

Rosepetal rolled her eyes, giving me a slightly aggressive nudge. "I'm fine," she hissed back, but there was an edge of humor in her voice. "Where in the name of StarClan are you going?"

I let out a sigh and shook out my fur. "Night stroll."

The she-cat narrowed her eyes, which luckily gleamed with amusement. "Shady."

"It is nighttime, so it's definitely a little more shadowy out there with all of the trees," I joked. After the she-cat rolled her eyes again, I gave her a nod in farewell and began to leave camp. "See you later, Rosepetal."

"Don't stay out too long," Rosepetal quietly called back to me. "Bramblestar and Lilypetal will be assembling the patrols for the kittypet attack just before dawn."

I let out a quiet sigh. "Oh, don't I know it," I breathed. And after the two of us exchanged another quick farewell, I quickened my pace and made my way out into ThunderClan territory.

And the forest was quiet in the strange way it had been ever since the flood. Not silent exactly - there were still the usual night sounds, the rustle of leaves shifting in the breeze and the distant call of an owl somewhere farther into the forest - but everything felt a little... *off*. Like the forest was still settling back into itself after everything it had gone through.

I slowly padded deeper into ThunderClan territory, letting my paws carry me wherever they wanted – I hadn't exactly left with a plan. *Well... the plan is to stay awake, I suppose.*

The ground still squished faintly beneath my paws, the mud soft from water that had only recently pulled back into the streams and lake. Every now and then my paw sank just enough to leave a shallow print that slowly filled with cloudy water behind me. *Gross.*

Still, things were starting to look normal again. A moon ago half the territory had looked like it belonged to RiverClan, but now fresh clumps of grass were pushing through the drying mud, and the forest smelled damp and earthy instead of like something that had been left underwater too long.

It wasn't perfect, but it was a lot better than it had been.

Without really thinking about it, I drifted closer to the WindClan border, which was fairly close to where our temporary camp was. The trees thinned slightly as the land sloped toward the border stream, and the faint scent of WindClan markers carried toward me in the breeze. When the sound of running water reached my ears, I angled down the slope and stepped out near the bank. *Hm...*

The stream was still high, its water rushing quickly between the stones, but it wasn't the wild, swollen mess it had been during the flood.

I sat for a moment, curling my tail neatly around my paws as I watched the water race past. When I found my eyes actually

starting to *close* even though I was sitting, I gave a shake of my head and then tried to focus on the quick movement of the water.

But I think my brain thought the sight was still too serene. My head was just about to fall forward once again before I forced myself to stand up. *Alright, stopping to smell the roses during this trip can't happen.*

And I was just about to turn away from the stream when a faint sound reached my ears from the opposite side. My head snapped up, ears pricking forward as every muscle in my body went still.

The scent drifted toward me a heartbeat later – a WindClan cat was nearby.

Instinct took over before I could even think about it. I dropped low and slipped behind a thick cluster of shrubs near the bank, the wet leaves brushing against my fur as I crouched. Holding still, I slowly lifted my head just enough to peer through the branches.

A shape moved along the other side of the stream.

The cat stepped through a patch of pale moonlight, and I studied the silhouette carefully. Long legs, narrow shoulders... *Good thing it's likely a WindClan cat in WindClan's territory...* A tom, judging by the outline.

He paced along the edge of the stream, head lowered slightly as if he were also observing it.

I narrowed my eyes as I watched them intently through the shrubs. *Who the heck are you?*

I shifted my weight just a little, trying to get a better look-

Crack.

The twig beneath my paw snapped before I could stop it.

Foxdung.

Across the stream, the WindClan cat froze.

For a few heartbeats he didn't move at all, his head lifting slowly as his ears flicked toward the sound. Then he disappeared abruptly into the brush, vanishing behind a low shrub near the bank.

I couldn't help narrowing my eyes slightly. *Well... that looked familiar.*

The forest went quiet again. I held perfectly still, barely *daring* to breathe as I peered through the leaves. The shrub across the stream rustled faintly as the other cat shifted, and I caught a brief flicker of movement between the branches.

I leaned forward a little, trying to see past the tangle of leaves. And for a moment there was nothing but shadows.

Then the clouds shifted. A thin beam of moonlight slipped through the branches overhead and splashed over the brush on the opposite side of the stream. Something glinted in the darkness.

Two sharp flashes of amber staring straight back at me.

My stomach tightened.

I'd recognize those eyes anywhere.

And StarClan curse me for not fully preparing myself for this scenario or even considering its likeliness.

I guess I was just that tired.

Across the stream, the cat seemed to reach a similar conclusion at the exact same moment. And after just a few heartbeats that felt like a few seasons, the shrub rustled again, and both of us slowly straightened, stepping out from behind our respective hiding spots.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

The stream rushed loudly between us, the moonlight glimmering on the water as we stood there in silence.

And as usual, I had absolutely *no* idea what to say to my father.

I mean, I had only just decided that I was open to speaking with him as of *last night*, for StarClan's sake. If it wasn't clear enough already, I hadn't had a moment to think about what I would even say.

I guess I didn't *have* to. For a moment, I even considered running away without a word. Aside from my last conversation with Breezepelt, I'd ignored him with everything I had. *It's not like it would be a surprise to him...*

But my paws wouldn't move. And unfortunately, that guilty and urging tug that I had been trying to ignore for the last several days still remained.

And my head was spinning at this point, continuing to leave me speechless as I stared back into Breezepelt's amber eyes from the other side of the border.

To my surprise, the tom's gaze was wary, but steady. I gave a nervous flick of my ears as his eyes then slowly narrowed. "Well, that's new," he then said flatly.

I narrowed my eyes right back at Breezepelt. "What is?"

"You," the black tom answered simply. "Still standing there."

"It's a surprise for me too," was all I managed next. My heart was *racing*.

The black tom's eyes managed to narrow even more. "I don't think I'm forcing you to stand there."

"No, you aren't."

"So... you can leave, then," Breezepelt then muttered, a slight edge of bitterness in his voice. "I understand how it is now, Swiftflight. Just go!"

I still couldn't move, my head still spinning about this opportunity that had somehow been laid at my paws. "...Are your paws stuck in the mud or something?" Breezepelt then asked.

I simply let out a heavy sigh. "No..."

There were a few unbearable moments of silence, and I then flicked my ears in surprise as Breezepelt sighed, his eyes flashing with worry. "StarClan, what have I done now? You're here to get after me again, aren't you?" Though the tom's tone was harsh, his amber eyes glowed with sincerity. "Look, I haven't done so much as *think* about Goldenshine since we last spoke! I-"

"I'm not here to tell you off, Breezepelt," I then insisted, my voice slightly raising to match the tom's. "I didn't even come out here to look for you!"

Breezepelt then looked genuinely surprised. "You didn't?"

"No!" I insisted, almost annoyed that the WindClan tom made this assumption, causing me to be able to form words. "A tom can't take a walk to clear his head?" *Or to stay awake...*

Breezepelt then looked away from me for a moment, sighing once again. "No, he definitely can..." he replied somberly.

Then, once again, there was silence, and my words were caught in my throat as I stared back at Breezepelt. The tom seemed to search my own gaze for a moment before his own wiped over with reluctance, and he turned away. "Well, I hope the rest of your walk is pleasant."

My stomach twisted with panic. "Where are you going?"

"Back to camp."

I almost surprised myself when I took a step forward. But I stopped myself before I let it be *several*. "...Why?"

Breezepelt just barely looked over his shoulder. "Just making sure I don't overstay my welcome with you."

I screwed my eyes shut for a moment. *Swiftflight, you can just let him go right now and avoid so many difficult things.*

But I still found myself calling out, "What's that supposed to mean?"

What am I doing?

This time, Breezepelt whipped himself back around, his amber eyes full of concern and irritation. "I'm sorry, are you suddenly a three moon-old kit?" he hissed. "What's with all the questions?"

I simply sighed and closed my eyes. "I don't know..."

I felt Breezepelt's gaze on me for a moment, and I opened my eyes again to see him slowly padding back towards me, looking wary. "Swiftflight, as much as I don't want to, I'm simply trying to respect your wishes."

I gave the slightest nod. *And you fully have up until this point too.* "I know," was all I could still say, my heart pounding in my ears and my words still stuck in my throat.

Breezepelt gave a sharp shrug. "That's that, then," he then muttered.

Wow...

I watched him turn and actually follow through, padding away without a second glance back. No argument, no attempt to push... Breezepelt was actually listening and *had* been listening.

He'd actually respected what I'd said, and StarClan help me, that counted for something.

Sure, maybe it was still an extensive attempt to manipulate, but...

I let out a quiet breath, irritation flickering under my pelt as the comparison forced its way in. My Clanmates hadn't exactly had a reason to trust me either, and they'd still given me the chance to prove myself despite my awful wrongs and my sick, apathetic existence.

They had taken that gamble with me. And though I had been trying to fight it, even now... *I want to do the same with Breezepelt.*

I shifted my weight, watching him get farther away, and made the decision before I could pick it apart any further. *StarClan help me.* "Wait, Breezepelt," I called out, almost by my own voice.

The black tom immediately paused. "What?"

"You..." I then trailed off a moment to take a deep breath. "You don't have to leave."

Breezepelt turned back around, suddenly looking so bewildered that I could barely stand it. "What?" he then repeated.

"Don't make me say it again," I murmured, closing my eyes as my heart continued to race.

"I'm questioning if you even said it once."

"I said it."

"You *don't* want me to leave?" Breezepelt then pressed as he padded quickly up to the stream, his gaze full of caution. "Are you even telling the truth?"

I forced myself to nod. "I am," I tried to meow clearly.

I then took another deep breath, hardly believing that I was about to bring up what I was. "Breezepelt... you were right."

Breezepelt shook his head slowly, clearly still astounded. "*How?"*

"You..." This already felt so strange that I wondered if I was even here. "You questioned if I actually wanted to shut you out, remember?"

Breezepelt flicked his ears. He clearly did. "...Yeah?"

"Well..." I then breathed, shifting uncomfortably in my spot as I looked down at my paws. *There's no turning back after you say this, Swiftflight...* I thought.

And yet, I went on, looking back up at Breezepelt. "Let's just say you were right to question."

With those words, Breezepelt didn't immediately reply, clearly also questioning the conversation that was being had right now. "You're being serious?"

"I am."

Breezepelt then continued to stare at me, his eyes wide with amazement, before he looked off for a moment and then gave a shake of his head. "Swiftflight, the last time we spoke, you told me that if you ever saw me again, it would be too soon."

I surprised myself as I immediately opened my mouth to retort, but he raised his tail for silence. "That's not a guilt trip, it's a fact."

Great StarClan, I'm such an idiot... "I did say that," I admitted reluctantly as I lowered my head, my stomach feeling heavy with regret. "But I..." *I can't believe I'm about to say this out loud...*

I then lifted my head to meet Breezepelt's gaze again. "I *should* feel guilty, because... I *wasn't* telling the truth then."

Breezepelt's eyes flashed with bewilderment once again. "You... you weren't?"

I flashed the tom a solemn glance. "I once spent *moons* saying awful things that I didn't mean for the sake of someone else," I reminded the tom, a chill running down my spine. "And I'm trying to say what I *do* mean now... which is..."

Another deep breath. *Here we go.* "You don't have to leave, Breezepelt. We... we can... talk."

Breezepelt now stared back at me more evenly, though it was clear he was still shocked. "Talk?"

"Yes. I want to talk with you," I meowed with more certainty, and weirdly, I felt more ease as I did so. And I actually found myself taking another step towards the WindClan tom. "I've *wanted* to for a very long time, I think. I'm... sorry that I haven't."

Breezepelt didn't reply immediately once again, taking some time to search my gaze. But thank StarClan, he must've seen something sincere there, because he evenly let out an amazed huff and shrugged. Then, to my surprise, he took a leap across the stream and landed just in front of me, sitting down. "Sorry for keeping your guard up, Swiftflight? I don't blame you," he then insisted to me. "I

never blamed you for that and wouldn't if you still *are*."

I gave a sheepish shrug right back, also sitting down. "Well... it's down," I admitted to Breezepelt as I narrowed my eyes contemplatively. "I don't think it was ever truly up in the first place."

I then looked down towards my paws once again, a certain tortoiseshell ThunderClan mother flashing into my mind as I spoke my next words. "I always wanted to trust you, but... I felt like I didn't have a reason to initially."

"And you feel like you do now?" Breezepelt asked, surprised.

I couldn't help but snort. "Well, it's not like I've seen you take kits on a badger ride or help an elder cross the thunderpath, but... I've been listening to you. Even if it looks like I haven't."

As another thought crossed my mind, I actually *scoffed*. "Great StarClan, I was *so* angry when you tried to relate to me, but what else could you do, Breezepelt? You were right." *I also had to accept that cats wouldn't trust me at first...* I *knew that I was changing and regretted my actions, but nothing but time could prove to everyone* else *that I was*, I thought to myself. *I just had to hope that my words and actions did the trick. In Breezepelt's case... I think they are...*

"Really?" Breezepelt pressed, breaking me from my thoughts.

I flashed the tom a slightly amused glance. "Am I going to be saying 'yes' to you all night?"

"Possibly," Breezepelt then muttered. After I simply gave him a nod of reassurance, he sighed and gave another shrug. "Well then... I haven't planned what I'd do after I made it past this step."

Well, thankfully for Breezepelt, I wasn't done. "I'll help," I then meowed clearly, though my heart still raced as I took another step towards him. "You really heard me that night when I talked to you during the Dark Forest battle?"

Breezepelt's gaze was filled with certainty as he gave me a nod. "The mere fact that you took the time to was enough to get my

attention, Swiftflight." His gaze then darkened as he lowered his head. "Even when you could have just accepted that I was an evil cat and decided it was no use."

At those words, I was suddenly overwhelmed with sympathy. I knew exactly who the tom was talking about. "Like you, it may not have looked like it, but..." Breezepelt then continued. "I heard every single word that you said."

I then watched as the tom looked off into the forest, his amber eyes still dark. "It took days for me to let it all sink in, but once it did... it hit me *hard*. That, and... all of my moons of anger, manipulation... threatening cats that cared about me, letting cats who have nothing but bad intentions get to my head, asking me to turn away from those that I'm supposed to *love*... I couldn't believe that I'd lived all of my life with so much resentment."

I nodded slowly back at Breezepelt, my own heart feeling heavy as he *perfectly* described how I'd once felt, and what I'd once experienced. "*They* make you believe that you'll have everything if you listen to them..." the tom then went on. "But in reality, they leave you with *nothing*."

Breezepelt's gaze then fell back on me. "I guess you made me realize that that isn't the end."

I nodded quickly back at him. "It's not."

"And that stuck with me," the WindClan cat meowed. "But also..."

I then was surprised to see Breezepelt's amber eyes shine with pride... the same pride that I'd wondered if I'd even seen it when I'd spoken to him during the battle. "Just seeing you there, my... my *son*, and who you had become and what you had lived through... I was proud."

I almost had to catch my breath, hardly believing that Breezepelt was using the words that he was. "You had managed to become such a noble warrior despite being tested in the worst ways," he went on. He then lowered his head. "And... with having a father that set the *worst* possible example for you."

As he then looked back up at me, I was met with a gaze full of immense regret. "You were right about something too, Swiftflight," he then meowed, his voice thick. "With how much time I had given to the Dark Forest... I could stand to give my son some acknowledgement."

He then took a deep breath. "And so... I wanted to change," he sighed. "Because of you, and... *for* you, among others."

...*Well.*

For a moment, I just stared at him, mind needing a moment to catch up with what I'd just heard. A strange, almost disbelieving warmth was spreading through my chest, pushing past the confusion, past the instinct to question it, and settling somewhere deeper.

I'd spent so long wondering if anything I'd said that night had mattered at all, if I'd just been talking to a wall, and now here he was - proving that it hadn't been for nothing.

It was... a lot to take in. More than I really knew what to do with, if I was being honest. "Wow, Breezepelt..." was all I could say at first.

And after a few more moments I sniffed, guilt overcoming me once again. "And yet I was one of the cats that made it harder for you..."

Breezepelt also sniffed. "You should have, but..." he then shrugged. "I did think it was going to be easier than it was."

He then flashed me an apologetic glance. "Which is why I lashed at you the first time we spoke. I'm sorry about that."

I widened my eyes back at the tom. I was honestly shocked that he'd brought that up. "Talk about biting the paw that feeds you," I muttered jokingly, bringing Breezepelt to snort. I then lowered my head. "But... I think I paid you back. It's fine."

The two of us then managed to exchange a small purr. I... I don't think we had ever done that before in my entire life. Breezepelt then slowly shook his head. "Weirdly, it's harsher moments like that from you that make me realize that you really are my son."

Those words made me feel a rush of affection. *The... the fact that he's acknowledging it...* "Yeah," I then breathed, looking back at Breezepelt warmly. "Thank you for listening to your son. That... what you said... that means more to me than I could describe." *I never could have imagined...*

I then closed my eyes as I was suddenly filled with an overwhelming amount of fear – fear almost stronger than facing Ashfur, or escaping the flood, or fighting a fox. "Which is why I really, really hope that you are telling the truth, Breezepelt..."

Breezepelt nodded back at me, his amber eyes full of desperation. "I swear to StarClan, I am telling the truth, Swiftflight."

I took another deep breath, trying to push down the fear and take my father's words to heart. "Good," I then breathed as I looked back up at him. "Continue to prove it, that's all you can do." *Please don't let me be wrong.*

"Oh, I'm trying," Breezepelt then muttered as he lashed his tail. "StarClan curse me if I screw this up now."

"Good luck," I meowed. I then gave a snort. "If I could get Poppyfrost to trust me, I believe you can get your Clan on your side for *sure*."

"Poppyfrost?" Breezepelt repeated, narrowing his eyes. I was then surprised as he padded forward and sat down near me. "Isn't Poppyfrost your mate's mother?"

I sighed. "I rejoice getting to hear that out loud," I answered as I shook my head in amazement. "Getting her to trust me felt like trying to convince a queen to leave her kit out in the forest by itself. I don't wish what I dealt with on you."

Breezepelt let out a huff. "Well, I have to admit, with some cats it has been pretty difficult."

"Like who?" I immediately asked. I then shifted in my spot, hesitating to ask my next question. "Crowfeather, I can imagine?"

To my surprise, Breezepelt snorted. "Weirdly, that lump of dark

gray fur has stuck around despite everything," he muttered. "I don't know *why*."

"It almost feels wrong, doesn't it?" I then asked, still bewildered that cats like Cherryfall, Snowstorm, or Goldenshine managed to see the good in me, even *now*.

"*Exactly*," Breezepelt replied. "Cats being against you almost makes more sense."

He then flicked his gaze towards me. "I'm still shocked that you're here."

I stared back at the tom, trying to grasp at any reluctance or regret, and honestly finding *none*. "Well, I am here," I meowed simply to the tom. "And I'm glad." *Even despite...*

"Me too," Breezepelt quickly answered. The two of us then shared a warm look, so I was worried when my father's gaze darkened once again. "If you really have wanted to hear me out for so long... why didn't you? You..." He then flicked his ears, as if recalling something. "You said that you said things you didn't mean for the sake of something else. Who is...?" As I then nervously took a glance towards ThunderClan territory, Breezepelt's demeanor sunk, seeming to know exactly what I was thinking. "Nevermind, I got it."

"I... I didn't want to disappoint her again," I found myself spilling to the tom, my worry suddenly becoming overwhelming. "I don't want her to feel betrayed."

"By speaking with me," Breezepelt confirmed.

"You've seen how adamant she is on thinking the worst of you," I went on, my voice cracking with distress. "She's acting like all four Clans will collapse underground if I don't do the same."

Breezepelt then sighed. "She is very set in her ways, and I don't blame her," he then meowed. "*You've* seen how much I want to try and convince her I'm changing, to no avail."

He then looked nervously down at his paws. "I guess the way I've been going about it isn't helping..." he the murmured bitterly. After

I sniffed in agreement, he looked back up at me, almost looking reluctant to speak. "But Swiftflight, you know she's just trying to protect you."

I found myself staring wide-eyed back at my father. "No *way* you just justified Goldenshine's actions."

"It's the truth. Listen, I can be *certain* that the love that me and your mother shared is long over, but I can't deny that it happened," Breezepelt then meowed as he looked off. "I still know her very well, and she'd probably say the same for me if I hadn't let me life go to foxdung."

He then took a deep breath. "Goldenshine is very black and white. It would be hard for her to picture a world where you give me a chance, and also have full loyalty to her," he then explained. "And..."

He then sighed shakily. "...She probably is just worried that I'll disappoint you again, and to her, keeping you away from me at all costs prevents that."

For a moment, I could only stare at Breezepelt in amazement. *I never got to see Goldenshine and Breezepelt in love, obviously. But like Breezepelt said, clearly their connection they had can't be denied.* "Wow..." I eventually murmured. "You really do know her well."

Breezepelt sniffed. "How do you think you're even here?"

"Great *StarClan*, you did not have to say that."

"Sorry."

"Whatever," I muttered dismissively. After processing Breezepelt's words for a moment, I then sighed. "I'm praying to StarClan that Goldenshine will open her mind up a little... to my choice, and... maybe even to you."

I then flashed him a warning glance. "Don't get me wrong, I still want you to stay away from her if that's what *she* wants, but..." I then looked ahead pensively. "She could reconsider... maybe?"

"I'm not counting on it. And that's okay," Breezepelt said, to my surprise. I then was surprised to see him glance back towards ThunderClan territory. "I just figured I should try and make amends with her as well, and... apologize... get some things off my chest."

"Oh, yeah?" I pressed, my eyes narrowing. "Like what?"

"Not any sort of love confession, if that's what you're worried about," Breezepelt muttered, bring me to purr quietly. "I..."

After hesitating for a few moments, he then breathed, "Well, she should hear it first, let's just say that."

I couldn't ignore the small twinge of fear I felt. "Be careful being so cryptic when you're trying to gain a cat's trust," I pressed to him.

"I know, I know," Breezepelt murmured. He then met me with a hard gaze. "But you can trust me. I hope that Goldenshine eventually will too."

Once again, I believed him. *Am I just being delusional, for StarClan's sake?*

My fear then continued to rise as another question arose that I could ask my father. *As terrified as I am to know the answer... I guess I'll know if I'm, in fact, being delusional.* "Breezepelt?"

Breezepelt looked back at me once again., seeming ready to answer anything I had for him "Hm?"

"Did..." I collected myself once more. "Did you really try to kill Goldenshine in the tunnels?"

Breezepelt made a sharp inhale, but I went on. "...and Dustystorm during the Great Battle... and Lionblaze?" I pressed. "Did you really want them dead?"

A chill seemed to run down Breezepelt's spine as I finished, and he closed his eyes as he contemplated the question... only briefly, which I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. "Brokenstar convinced me that I did... and it's awful," he eventually answered, already bringing me relief. "He... he acted like getting rid of these cats that

brought me anger and that pulled me away from what was most important *had* to go."

He then shook his head. "In all three instances, thank StarClan I was pulled away from them. I would like to think that I never would have gone through with any of it..." He then lowered his head in shame. "But I luckily won't ever find out. I just get to be grateful that I didn't do it."

Whoa.

A chill then ran down my own spine at Breezepelt's words, which resonated with me more than I thought they would, because...

I hated to think of what would have happened if I had never gotten out of there. What if I didn't have cats around to stop me and help me see sense? *And when I fought Snowstorm during that training session when we were apprentices... and my claws were sheathed... what if Dustystorm and Icecloud weren't there to pull me away?*

Like Breezepelt said, I would like to think I would have just seen sense in the moment and not gone through with it... and not let the words of Dark Forest cats get to me, but...

With my nightmare I'd been having, I was almost getting a glimpse of what would've happened if I did. *And it's absolute torture...*

I found myself screwing my eyes shut, my head lowering as I was suddenly overwhelmed with guilt and distress.

And clearly, Breezepelt noticed. "What?"

Once again, I found myself being honest with Breezepelt. "I've..." I began as I lifted my head. "I've just been dealing with some nightmares lately. About *my* torment in the Dark Forest, and... I guess what things would have been like if I'd gone through with anything Ashfur pulled me into."

I then sheepishly looked away from Breezepelt, most reluctant to say the next part. "I've... been losing sleep over it."

Breezepelt let out a sigh. "That Ashfur..." he muttered bitterly. "I can

still hardly believe that you managed to get away from him. I think he may have been more conniving and manipulative than Tigerstar or Brokenstar."

I looked back at my father, baffled that he'd made such a statement. "I..." he then went on. "I still can't believe the lengths he went to for revenge." I then noted how dark Breezepelt's amber eyes became, making curiosity flare up inside of me.

But before I could press, his eyes then flashed with worry. "Is that why you looked so tired the other day... and still do now?"

My gaze shifted nervously back and forth. "...Possibly."

Breezepelt then stood up. "Then what in the name of StarClan are you doing out here, you mouse-brain?" he then asked, his voice rising.

"Trying to avoid them!" I then insisted.

"You idiot!"

"I know!" I replied. "But it's either go through torture in my sleep, or be a little tired."

Breezepelt then snorted. "Yeah, but for how long?"

"Not long!" I reassured the tom. "I'm going to talk to Jayfeather at some point, or maybe Lilypetal – she said she's having nightmares too."

"Then do that, great StarClan," Breezepelt muttered. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"I don't disagree," I then sighed. I then flashed him a sharp, yet amused look. "Now stop calling me stupid."

"Then stop being stupid." The two of us then exchanged yet another warm look – one that acknowledged just how crazy that warmth was – before Breezepelt looked worriedly back at me. "So... are you going to tell your mother that we talked?"

I let out a groan full of dread. "Eventually, I suppose, but it won't be tomorrow morning," I answered before rolling my eyes. "Bramblestar's leading a battle patrol to help ShadowClan fight off some kittypets."

Breezepelt's eyes shot down into slits. "Kittypets? Did I hear you right?"

"Once again, yes."

"Great StarClan, when did ShadowClan become a pile of flower petals?" my father asked. "Why do they need ThunderClan's help?"

I sniffed. "Maybe they don't, but Bramblestar's proving he's similar to Firestar already... and Rowanstar's proving he's not the most aggressive type."

"No kidding," Breezepelt replied. "Are you on the patrol that's going?"

"Yes, and..." I then made myself look up at the sky, feeling dread and reluctance as I saw it just barely beginning to turn purple. *Dawn is coming soon...* "I probably need to return to camp soon before I'm missed..."

I looked back at Breezepelt to see the same reluctance in his amber eyes. "Okay," he meowed after a moment.

Then, the two of us coincidentally took a deep breath at the same time. "I guess I can continue to worry and tell you to be safe," Breezepelt muttered, humor in his voice, but his eyes were deep and sincere.

And seeing that, and hearing that... I don't know why it meant so much. "I will," I barely was able to force out. "I..."

I suddenly felt at a loss for words again, and I looked around nervously as I tried to find them. "I... this was-"

"I agree," Breezepelt purred, bringing me to look warmly back at him as he seemed to find the words for me. "Bye, Swiftflight. And... thank you."

"I... of course," I meowed. Great StarClan, despite everything we'd just spoken about, I could still hardly believe that this was happening. "Bye, Breezepelt."

I then hesitated before speaking again. "Talk to you soon, maybe? We could accidentally bump into each other again at the next Gathering?" *We haven't done that since I was a new apprentice... or even had another civil conversation since then...*

Breezepelt seemed to think exactly what I was, his gaze warm as he nodded. "Sounds like a plan," he breathed. He then stared back at me for a few more moments before turning around, leaping back across the stream, and padding deeper into his own territory.

And I stood there longer than I should have, staring at the empty space where Breezepelt had disappeared, like if I looked hard enough he might reappear and tell me I'd imagined the whole thing. It would have been easier if I had, almost.

But instead, I trusted my instincts. I was going to give Breezepelt a chance and I told him so.

However, I wasn't naive enough to think one conversation fixed everything, and I definitely wasn't going to pretend I trusted him completely. This was going to take time - watching him, listening, seeing if his actions actually lined up with his words. There was still so much more I wanted to say to him eventually.

But great StarClan, I hated how much I loved the thought of making amends with my father in some form. I almost scoffed out loud at that. For moons, I'd told myself I didn't need that - didn't want it, even. I'd had other cats step in where it mattered. I'd had father *figures* in cats like Mousewhisker and Dustystorm. I'd been fine.

...Mostly.

I flicked an ear, irritation prickling at the thought as I then made my way through ThunderClan territory. Because if I was being honest, I'd thought about it more than I ever let on. So, this could have been an all-around exciting situation for me.

...Until I thought about Goldenshine.

As I traveled through the forest, I slowed a bit as the tunnel entrance came into view, my chest tightening.

I didn't regret doing this though. That was the problem. *Because if I don't regret it, I have to stand by it.*

And eventually, I was going to have to tell her.

I'd dug my own hole, that was for sure.

Chapter 27

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

It was actually unreal how beautiful the dawn sky looked. The navy blue of night had nearly disappeared, the sky filled with a gorgeous mix of pink, blue and purple, and the rising sun attempted to leak its light through the slowly moving clouds.

I was trying to focus on that as much as I could as Bramblestar and I led the battle patrol through the forest. My heart was pounding in my ears, and I could barely hear the crickets chirping or the pawsteps of my Clanmates behind me.

But that was just battle nerves. Weirdly, right now, I was okay, and I truly felt ready for this.

I still cringed to think about how I'd spent yesterday, however. My outburst out in the forest was one thing, but as Thornclaw had commanded, I had spent the rest of the day after that *resting*.

Just. Resting.

Thornclaw had stayed with me the entire day, making sure I was comfortable, making sure that I ate, and soothing me if I became restless or woke up from a nightmare. He was an angel, as he always was.

And because of that, I proceeded to still apologize to him *whenever* it came to my mind, even if he told me it was okay every single time. But I suppose we were already even, because he was asking if I was okay, I assumed, whenever it came to his mind.

And I could feel my mate's gaze on me every once in a while from behind me as our group traveled, and, of course, he'd asked me several times this morning if I was okay to do this.

And I was being completely genuine every time I told him that I was.

Sure, beyond today, I was really, *really* going to try and go easy on myself, but truthfully, after a day of rest, and after acknowledging all of my internal hardships, the journey to healing already had accelerated significantly.

And truthfully, at this moment, nothing sounded better than fighting with my Clan, and helping another. *Whether or not they asked for it...*

If anything, the fact that we were doing this behind Rowanstar's back was making me feel uneasy, and I had no idea during what point in the battle he was going to found out what we were doing. Unless every cat in ShadowClan sleeps through all of the slashes and yowls? I then snorted to myself. Great StarClan, if only!

And I could almost sense that Bramblestar was thinking the same thing as I glanced in his direction – his amber eyes slightly narrowed and contemplative as he stared off, the tip of his tail twitching anxiously.

I gave the ThunderClan leader a light, supportive nudge. "You know, I think Firestar would be proud of us," I purred quietly to the tabby. "Sneaking behind another Clan's back to help them even when they say no? He did that all of the time and still became a respected ThunderClan leader!"

To my relief, the tom let out a small purr of amusement. "You really think this will make me a respected ThunderClan leader?"

I looked back at Bramblestar with concern. "You don't think you're one already?"

"If I can become half of one, I'll be happy," Bramblestar muttered, almost to himself. He then huffed softly, eyes fixed ahead. "I'm praying to StarClan that helping ShadowClan will make me at least a quarter of one."

I let out a short breath, glancing at him. "I'd argue that you're

already there, Bramblestar. Goodness gracious."

He gave a little sniff. "Thank you." His gaze then shifted forward again. "Also praying that helping ShadowClan won't bump me down to zero."

"We'll all get bumped down to zero together then," I joked to the ThunderClan leader. "We could have convinced you that this plan was crazy if we really wanted to."

Bramblestar sniffed with amusement once again. "That's true," he admitted. I then was relieved to see him take a deep breath. "Thanks, Lilypetal. Really, and I'm glad you're here."

I flashed the tom a look full of gratitude, but stayed quiet as he added, more carefully, "But are you sure you feel okay to be here?"

I sighed, pretending to be annoyed. "Not you too," I purred. Bramblestar was one of *many* cats today that had checked on me. Thornclaw, of course, but nearly everyone that I *knew* had asked me the question at least once today. It was so kind of them, and I luckily had given the same answer every time. "Yes, I am, Bramblestar. Thank you."

"Okay, good," he replied with relief. "But if at any point you need a break, just let me know."

I shot him a look. "What, like during the battle?"

"Well," he hesitated, ears tipping slightly, "that wouldn't be the most convenient, I suppose."

I gave a sniff. "StarClan forbid that happens," I muttered. *Again.* "But I should be okay."

I then looked ahead, giving a sigh. "And we should be okay, no matter how Rowanstar reacts."

I then flicked my ears, surprised as I heard a voice come from behind me. "No matter how Rowanstar reacts, we still fixed his kittypet problem," Jessy meowed, her amber eyes glowing with determination. "So screw how he reacts!"

I purred with amusement, exchanging a look with Bramblestar at the kittypet's comment. But I also found myself having to push down the *smallest* bit of jealousy at the she-cat's fiery attitude – one that Bramblestar had compared me to just days ago. *And while I'm leading my Clan into battle today with pride, I feel like it will still be a bit before I fully feel like myself again.*

A small chill then ran down my spine as Thornclaw's words echoed in my mind. *As much as I see you trying to hold onto that bright, spirited, optimistic, and determined she-cat that I fell so deeply in love with... I worry you're losing her the harder you try.*

Great StarClan, those words had hurt, but they were true. I had to give myself time and grace to become that bright, spirited, optimistic, and determined she-cat again. *But seeing Jessy fill that role for me, as well as be such a big contributor to navigating how to fight these kittypets doesn't make me feel the best...*

I then forced myself to take a deep breath and flash the she-cat a grateful glance. But I appreciate her help, I really do. I'm glad that she took care of things when I couldn't. and honestly, the brown tabby she-cat had been *astronomical* in preparing us for this battle. She knew these kittypets, for one, but was familiar with their territory and how they behaved. *If we can't outsmart them now, no one can!*

Both Bramblestar and I then abruptly paused as we both heard Jessy gasp behind us. "Hey, I recognize this tree stump up ahead!" the she-cat exclaimed. We all then watched, intrigued, as she slowly stepped forward and gaped her jaws. She then gave a confident nod. "Yep, we're heading in the right direction."

With Jessy now enthusiastically leading, our battle patrol cautiously padded on. And as we traveled farther away from Clan territory, I nervously glanced behind me to make sure that everyone was accounted for – everyone was, but I still remained nervous as my eyes fell on certain cats among the patrol.

Even though she was fully grown and one of the strongest cats I knew, Goldenshine going into battle always terrified me no matter how old she got. Swiftflight didn't make me feel too good either, or

Thornclaw...

But my stomach was flipping upside *down* at the fact that my apprentice, Lilypaw, was going to be fighting in this battle.

I knew she could do it, but at the same time, I was tempted to question my own mentorship, *especially* when at some points I had been so tired and so distant during our training. But despite that, she seemed ready, and Bramblestar had thought that she was ready too. *She is*, I told myself as I took a deep breath. *But I still pray to StarClan that she is safe.*

I flicked my ears as my gaze actually met the younger she-cat's for a moment, and as I had expected, her blue eyes were blazing with nothing but excitement and determination. Although I was almost sure she didn't need it, I flashed her an encouraging look before turning back forward, just barely catching Cinderheart and Ivypool returning in front of us, who had traveled a little ways ahead to see how much farther we had to go.

"We're nearly there!" Cinderheart exclaimed as they came to a stop. "Ivypool and I could see a fence a little ways ahead."

"And it *reeks* of kittypet too," Ivypool then groaned. She then flicked her ears, giving a nod to Jessy. "Sorry."

The white and tabby she-cat then looked back at Bramblestar. "We don't have much farther to go."

"We definitely don't!" Jessy then meowed, running ahead to some bushes and sticking her head through. "I recognize that fence up ahead!" Bramblestar and me then exchanged an amused glance as the kittypet then fully leaped through the bushes and to the other side. "Let's go!"

I sniffed, glancing over my shoulder back at our patrol – most of them either looking amused or baffled – as I gave a flick of my tail. "Let's go!" I then repeated as I purred. And I continued to walk alongside Bramblestar as we led ThunderClan through the same bushes.

And sure enough, just as Cinderheart, Ivypool, and Jessy had said – there was a wooden fence up ahead, and I could just barely see several Twoleg nests beyond that.

At this sight, my heart began to beat faster all over again – not just because we were near a Twolegplace, but this meant that the battle was beginning soon.

I tried to take another deep breath as I looked over my shoulder once again, now hoping to meet the pale blue gaze of my mate.

And thank StarClan, he was right in my view, which I was almost certain was his own intention. As our gazes locked, I immediately felt a rush of comfort, and as much as I hated to admit it, I don't know if I'd feel nearly as calm if he wasn't here. I was still amazed that just looking into his reassuring eyes for just a few moments made me feel like I could leap over the highest mountain. *And hopefully fight some kittypets...*

I flashed my mate a look of gratitude and love before looking ahead again, flicking my ears as Jessy spoke, leading us into the Twolegplace in between two nests and then turning right. "Victor is who we're looking for, I'm sure of it," the she-cat stated. I then took yet another deep breath as Jessy paused at the back of a nest, right next to a tall fence. "This is his nest."

I then watched as the brown she-cat nodded to me and Bramblestar, and after the two of us exchanged a wary glance, we joined her and then leapt to the top of the barrier.

We were all immediately met with an empty backyard, and by a kittypet's standards, a *messy* one – overgrown grass, worn out Twoleg equipment spread around, and dead flowers drooping along the fence line.

I hated to go off of looks, but I could tell that these cats – maybe even the Twolegs too – didn't like to play nice.

I had just barely found my footing on the fence, thank StarClan, because I maybe would have fallen over if the booming voice that came had happened just a heartbeat earlier. "What are you doing

here?"

A black-and-white tom had emerged from beneath a cluster of bushes near the fence. He stood staring up at us, his tail flicking irritably behind him. There was no fear in his gaze when he looked at us. If anything... he seemed annoyed that we'd interrupted his morning.

Then his eyes landed on Jessy, and they wiped over with complete shock, as if she was doing backflips on the fence while yowling at the top of her lungs. "*Jessy?"* he nearly yowled. "What are you doing here? Aren't these some of those wild cats?"

"*Those wild cats?* Please," Jessy immediately spit back. "Don't act like you haven't acquainted yourself with them already."

The she-cat's fur was slowly beginning to bristle. "I'm here to help them tell you to *leave them alone*."

As intimidating and authoritative as Jessy had sounded, I could already tell that this tom was not ready to take *anything* seriously. And sure enough, he simply blinked once before letting out a short, disbelieving purr.

"Really?" he asked. "And here I thought you had more sense than that."

He padded closer to the fence and sat down, curling his tail around his paws, and the casualness of the gesture *irritated* me. Although I was nowhere *near* being a kittypet anymore, I was almost *embarrassed.* ShadowClan had barely survived the flood. Their territory was damaged, their prey was scarce, and their warriors were exhausted, and yet this idiot looked as though the whole thing were some kind of game. *Kittypets are known to be weak, but they usually have more heart than this.*

"I thought you'd have some more sense too, Webster," Jessy hissed back.

I had to hold back a sniff. *Webster? Oh, this keeps getting better.*

"What is the point of needlessly attacking cats that you don't even

know, who aren't doing *anything* to you?" Jessy then went on. "I can't believe I even need to explain this to you!"

Bramblestar and I briefly exchanged a shocked, yet impressed glance as Jessy had spoken to Webster – she was speaking up for us as if she had been a part of ThunderClan for *moons*.

"I don't need your guilt trip!" Webster growled back, and I felt myself slightly stiffen as he slowly padded closer to the fence we were on. "And I'd think before you decide to open your jaws again."

My heart was *pounding* in my ears once again. Great StarClan, I was almost as nervous as I was for my first fight ever – my head felt full, I was still a bit tired, and I felt out of practice.

And, of course, the self-doubt was *overwhelming*.

But I was forced back into focus as I felt Bramblestar's tail tap my shoulder. "Be ready to jump," he whispered to both me and Jessy.

As I nodded to acknowledge my leader, I took probably the hundredth deep breath of the day.

Here we go. There was no turning back now. No time to overthink.

And I don't know why, but I think that fact yanked me *right* where I needed to be. Adrenaline seemed to rush through my blood, making me almost feel as if I was floating above the fence.

I heard the stirring of my Clanmates behind me, who had all powered through getting up at dawn to defend *another* Clan. They had trusted that Bramblestar and I had made the right choice by coming here. No *way* I could cower away now.

But most of all, looking down at Webster's sneer, seeing just how heartless a cat could be and tearing down a group of cats, Clan cats, that were already weakened, filled me with an anger that made me want fight with all of my might to help ShadowClan.

There was no overthinking to do here. I was going to do what ThunderClan does best – break through the Clan barriers to help another Clan in need and I was going to do it to the best of my

ability.

And heck, if I faltered in the middle of the battle, at least I tried and went into it swinging.

I let out a huff, standing up straighter, one of my ears flicking as I could hear more stirring from deeper into the yard. *Let's do this.*

"Someone giving you trouble, Webster?"

I narrowed my eyes as another tom emerged into view, two she-cats following right behind him, and all three of them with gazes full of indignation.

I heard Jessy let out a sigh from Bramblestar's other side. "That's Victor at the front," Jessy whispered. "Scarlet and O'Hara are behind him."

I then watched as the brown she-cat slowly unsheathed her claws. "They aren't going to be into negotiating any more than Webster was."

I let out a quiet snort. "That's a shame. Webster has been so compliant," I muttered.

Bramblestar and Jessy hardly go to let out a purr as Webster replied to his friend. "No trouble at all, Victor," the black and white tom replied as the three other cats arrived beside him. "In fact, I'm pretty excited. Some wild cats want to have a go at fighting us."

Victor let out a satisfied grunt, briefly looking back at the two she-cats behind him. "Well, what are we waiting for, then?"

The dark-colored tom then crouched down, his eyes blazing. "Get them!"

That yowl seemed to explode across the garden, and suddenly, everything seemed to happen at once.

Victor launched himself upward, his claws flashing in the dawn light. Webster sprang from below the fence almost simultaneously, while Scarlet and O'Hara rushed after him, pelts bristling and eyes

blazing with determination.

"Jump!" Bramblestar ordered.

Thank StarClan, I didn't hesitate.

Digging my claws into the wooden fence for balance, I pushed off hard. For a heartbeat I hung suspended in the air, then the ground rushed up to meet me as the backyard erupted into chaos.

The air filled with screeches, snarls, and the thunder of paws pounding through soft earth. Cats crashed through the tall grass towards Jessy, Bramblestar and me.

Through the chaos, I spotted Scarlet pelting right towards me.

Not having time for fear to rear its ugly head, I leapt towards her first, feeling another rush of adrenaline as I managed to pin her to the ground. The she-cat twisted beneath me with surprising strength, barely missing my nose as she clawed right at my face.

And unfortunately before I could even attempt a swipe at her, she shoved upward with her hind legs, throwing me off balance. A heartbeat later her paw slammed into my muzzle.

Pain exploded across my face.

Stars flashed across my vision as I staggered backward. My ears rang. The world blurred for a moment as I blinked furiously, trying to clear my sight.

My heart managed to race even more as I gave a quick shake of my head, knowing that I *maybe* had half of a heartbeat to recover. *No! Am I really going to be brought down so soon?*

But all it took was the pain in my cheek and the victorious look in Scarlet's for those thoughts to disintegrate.

I then managed to shake out my fur, letting out an angry hiss as I forced myself to leap right back at Scarlet. Nope! I thought to myself as I felt a rush of determination. Shut up with these stupid thoughts!

Scarlet let out an alarmed yowl as I bowled straight into her once again. *They aren't going to win... and neither is Scarlet!*

I pinned the she-cat down once again, hardly giving her time to react as I slashed my right paw across her shoulder. She winced, letting out a sharp yowl.

But she recovered fast. *Too* fast.

With a snarl, she launched herself straight at me. Then at the last heartbeat, I darted aside.

If I had time to, I would have purred as I watched Scarlet's eyes widen – she'd committed all of her weight to this attack.

So I simply watched as her paws hit a patch of loose, churned-up earth. "Darn it!" she spat.

Of course, I didn't waste the opportunity, and I slammed into her side as hard as I could, bringing Scarlet to crash to the ground. Before she could recover, I pinned her shoulders, just barely unsheathing my claws into her fur.

Wow, I'd forgotten how neat this felt. Within reason, of course. "Had enough?" I hissed down at Scarlet.

I felt a rush of victory as the she-cat shoved backward, scrambling free from beneath me.

I expected her to attack again, but instead, she stared at me for a heartbeat.

Then she turned and ran.

Relief flooded through me as her ginger pelt disappeared through the chaos of the garden.

One down!

I then flicked my ears with alarm as a sharp shriek from somewhere behind me pulled me away from my internal celebration.

Two more cats were pelting into the clearing – but just by their demeanor and the look in their eyes as they ran in, I could tell that they were probably going to equate to... *four* cats.

A gray tom vaulted effortlessly over a bush and landed beside Victor. Another appeared moments later, weaving through the yard toward the fighting.

Thank StarClan, Bramblestar had seen them too as he wrestled with Victor, and I was overwhelmed with relief at his next words. "ThunderClan!" he roared. "Attack!"

His voice rang across the Twolegplace, echoing between fences and Twoleg nests.

And it only took a moment for our patrol to leap over the fence and come bursting into the garden. *Heck, yeah!*

Warriors poured over the fence like a wave crashing onto shore, Lionblaze at the front. The golden warrior charged into the battle like a boulder tumbling down a hillside, scattering kittypets in every direction.

One tom barely managed to leap aside before Lionblaze slammed into him. Nearby, Goldenshine darted between opponents with quick, precise movements, striking and retreating before her enemies could react. Swiftflight barreled headlong into one of the newcomers, bowling him over and sending him crashing into a patch of dead flowers.

And I felt my heart completely *drop* as Lilypaw pelted towards O'Hara, who was currently making an attempt to sneak up on Bramblestar, who was still neck and neck with Webster. *Oh my StarClan, Lilypaw.*

Without even thinking, I ran forward, terrified that my apprentice wouldn't be able to take on that vicious kittypet by herself. And as I ran, cats screeched, yowled, and grappled all around me, but I didn't care – I was staring straight ahead, ready to fight side by side with my apprentice.

But when I was nearly to her, something slammed into my side, *hard*. My skull struck something hard as I hit the ground, and pain exploded through my head in a blinding flash. The world tilted, then sound snapped away completely as everything went dark. I didn't even get time to feel fear.

There was nothing at first - just stillness.

The battle suddenly felt far away, muffled like I was sinking under deep water.

But then even that faded, replaced by silence and the faint, steady murmur of a stream nearby. ...*huh?*

I lifted my head without knowing why, and the darkness broke open into a sky so vast it took my breath away - endless deep blue scattered with stars brighter than anything I had ever seen.

And for a moment, everything stopped hurting. My body, my thoughts, even fear itself slipped away into a calm so heavy it felt wrong. *Uh, oh.*

There was only one way that I felt a cat could feel so much ease. *StarClan?* The thought flickered through me. *Am I making my way to StarClan? No!*

But that panic only lasted a moment. Weirdly, that ease came right back, but... not in a way that felt like I was dying. At least, I didn't think so.

I could hear the stream flowing beside me, soft and inviting. The stars above me glowed so brightly that I almost thought I was right next to them.

I could then slightly hear unintelligible meows surrounding me – soft, but strong and encouraging.

I suddenly felt strength in my muscles, the pain in my head fully eased, and I was filled with a resilience I'd never felt before.

Then something seized me.

Violent, sudden - like claws ripping me backward out of the sky.

The stars faded, the silence disappeared, pain crashed back into my body all at once, and I gasped as my eyes flew open.

The yowls of battle surrounded me once again, but all I could see above me now were the frantic blue eyes of Thornclaw looking down at me. "Lilypetal!" my mate meowed to me urgently, his paws braced against me as I jolted. He then gently brushed his tail over my head as I attempted to stir. "Hey, stay down."

I complied, my head pounding as I let it fall back down in the grass. "What happened?" I rasped.

"You were out," he said quickly. "One of those kittypets slammed right into you as you ran to Lilypaw, and then you hit your head against some weird-shaped rock."

I narrowed my eyes back at Thornclaw, then managing to lift my head and look behind me.

I also managed a roll of my eyes as I recognized the weird, rectangle stone with two square holes in it. "Cinderblock," I sighed. "Honestly, I'm lucky to be alive right now."

"Don't say that!" Thornclaw insisted. He then touched my head with one of his paws, and lifted the other close to my face. "How are you feeling? How many paws do you see?"

I blinked hard, forcing focus through the ringing in my skull. "One... paw," I managed. *I could also deduce that since you're touching me with the other one... but I luckily also just see one.*

"Good. Stay with me," he said, scanning my face fast.

A shaky breath left me. "Don't worry, the pain is subsiding a little..." I sighed as I managed to turn over onto my belly.

I then managed to feel a twinge of panic. "How is Lilypaw? What happened with her and O'Hara?"

To my surprise, Thornclaw sniffed. "O'Hara? Do you mean that

silver tabby that she was sneaking up on? Lilypaw leaped onto that kittypet's back and totally took her by surprise!"

Thornclaw's words filled me up with so much joy and relief, I managed to lift my head. "She did?"

"Absolutely. It only took a few rakes across the back, and O'Hara ran off," Thornclaw continued, his pale blue eyes gleaming as he gave me a light flick on the ear with his tail. "You've taught her well, Lilypetal. Please know that."

I then almost managed a purr as my mate gave a quick shake of his head. "But forget that! How are you now? Can you stand?"

After a deep breath, I answered the tom by slowly getting up to my paws – my head hurt while doing so, but I managed to stay steady. "Standing!" I then huffed.

"You're swaying," he snapped back immediately, putting the tip of his tail on my shoulder.

I managed a deep breath, and my sight was finally fully going back into focus. My head still hurt like crazy, but I think with the chaos behind us, I felt like I could ignore it. "Just adjusting," I breathed as I shook out my fur. "I think I'm okay."

"You know by now that I'm going to have a hard time believing you," he muttered, eyes still locked on me like he expected me to drop at any moment.

But I didn't – weirdly, I felt pretty good, aside from the headache. I still had adrenaline rushing through me, so much that the headache didn't even matter, and I felt strong and determined as ever. "I am being completely truthful when I say I am okay," I reassured my mate, though I knew that after all I'd put him through, that would be tough to do. "I will tap out if the headache gets worse."

When Thornclaw simply gave me a skeptical look, I put the tip of my tail on his shoulder. "I really, really will. I promise, promise."

Thornclaw's eyes were dark with thoughtfulness for a moment, and then he took a deep breath. "Compromise?" he then meowed.

"Yes?" I immediately pressed with intrigue.

"Can we fight the rest of this together?" my mate then meowed, his gaze reluctant yet full of urgency. "I just want to make sure you're safe. Please."

My heart felt so genuinely full as I stared back at my mate, giving me even more strength than I had before. "StarClan curse me if I reject that compromise," I whispered softly to Thornclaw, touching my nose to his. *And StarClan curse me if I ever push you away again. You give me strength in everything I do.*

I then flicked my tail towards the fighting cats. "Let's go, and drag me right out of there if I show any signs of weakness."

Thornclaw let out a purr. "Gladly," he meowed, flicking my ear with his tail again before running side by side with me deeper into the clearing. "Let's do this!"

And as we ran, the dizziness was still there, lingering at the edges of my vision, but it no longer threatened to drag me down. Instead, a strange warmth seemed to exist beneath my pelt, filling me with an energy I couldn't even explain. My head still ached, and blood still matted the fur near my ear, but somehow *none* of it felt as heavy as it should have.

As Thornclaw and I plunged back into the battle side by side, I couldn't stop thinking about where I had just been. It was StarClan, I was almost sure of it.

Not to *bring* me to StarClan, but simply to let me know that they were there.

And quite possibly... someone specifically from StarClan was trying to reach me... *like they have many times before...*

And that filled me with a fierce, impossible sense of certainty.

Whatever had happened, I was still here.

And I wasn't finished.

Right now, there was a *battle* to finish. And I was more than ready for it.